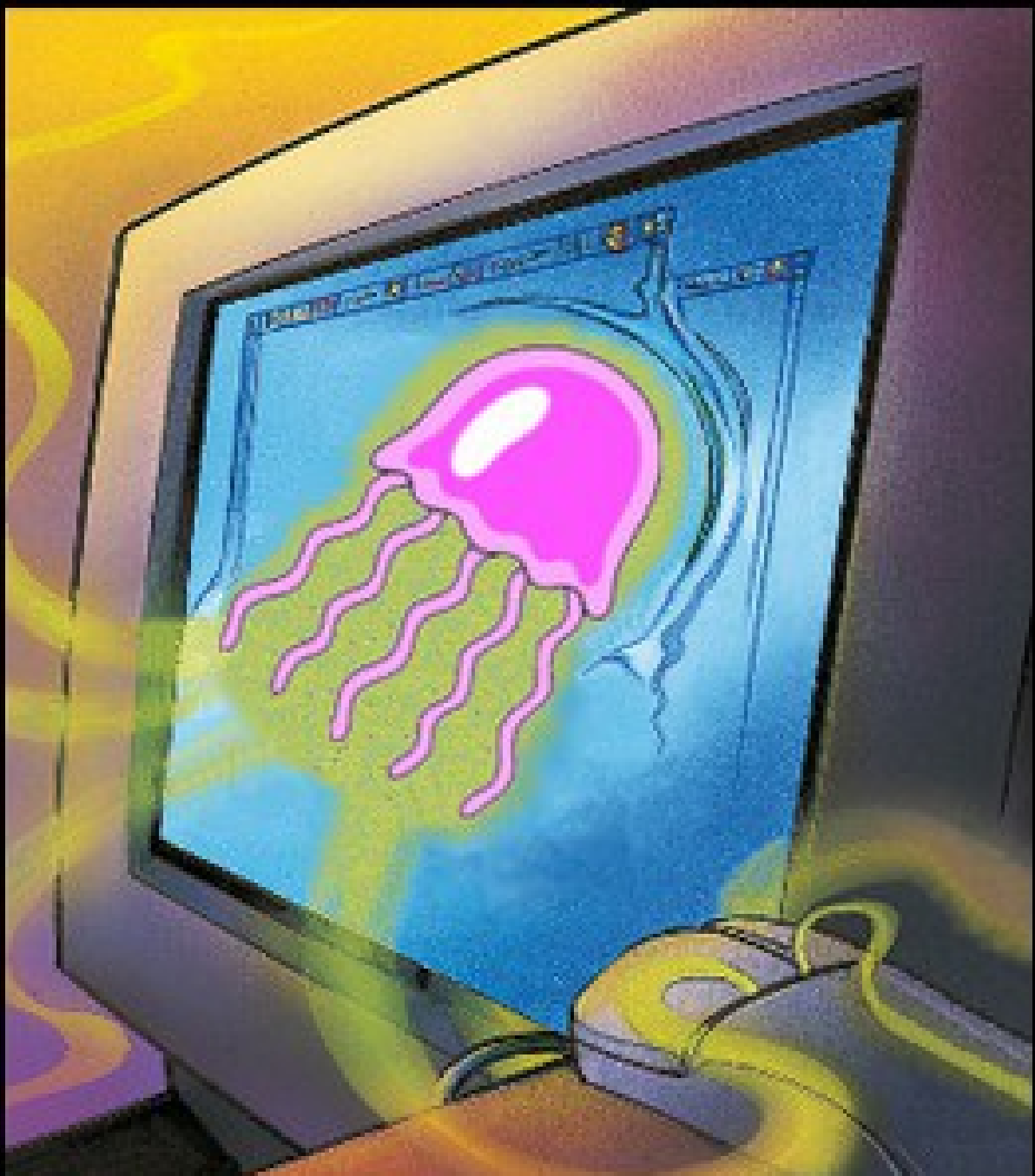


THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE JELLYFISH VIRUS





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
JELLYFISH VIRUS**

When diving off the coast of Rocky Beach, Meg Baker encounters a group of jellyfish and gets stung badly. While still recovering, she receives an e-mail containing a computer virus in the form of a jellyfish. Are these two incidents a coincidence? With the help of a computer whiz, The Three Investigators offer to track down the culprit. However, Jupiter, Pete and Bob face competition from another detective who makes their investigations more difficult and confusing, especially when they discover dealings that involve more than just the sea creatures.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Jellyfish Virus

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Die drei ???: Gift per E-Mail

(The Three ???: Poison by E-Mail)

by

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1. Detective Wanted

Completely exhausted, Pete threw his sports bag into the corner. “Whew, that was some intense swim practice... and all just for the school championships.”

“Oh, no.” Jupiter smiled. Swimming was about the only sport in which he could keep up with Pete and sometimes even surpassed him—at least in breaststroke. Also today, he had been faster again. He stretched his chest boastfully. “Look here... I am totally relaxed and I still have energy for a thousand metres...”

“Don’t brag, Jupe!” Pete replied, insulted. “Fat just floats.”

This was an allusion to Jupiter’s stately body weight, but the First Investigator was in much too good a mood and did not let Pete annoy him.

“I’ll beat you at the school championships,” he announced confidently and looked around. “Where’s Bob?”

When they turned the corner on their bikes, Bob was still close behind them. For the last hundred metres to the salvage yard, The Three Investigators sprinted off, as so often, to see who reached the destination first.

Jupiter pushed a few music magazines aside to take a look at the answering machine they had installed in their headquarters. The flashing red light indicated that calls had been received. He was particularly proud of the telephone system with the self-made loudspeaker.

But the old trailer had a lot more surprises inside—computer, photo lab and various items for detective research which had accumulated over time to be an almost professional detective set-up. It wasn’t always the latest thing they acquired because the three boys didn’t have enough money for that. But at The Jones Salvage Yard, where the headquarters of The Three Investigators was located, there were always unused items which the detectives repaired ingeniously for their purposes. One of them was the periscope, which they called ‘See-All’, with which they could observe the surroundings of the trailer. While Jupiter listened to the answering machine, Pete looked through the periscope and kept an eye out for Bob.

The first caller was Aunt Mathilda, Jupiter’s aunt. Jupiter had been staying with his uncle Titus and aunt Mathilda since the death of his parents many years ago. Unfortunately, it was a kind of favourite pastime of Aunt Mathilda to give out work orders.

Resignedly, Jupiter listened to her message: “Jupe! Where are you hanging around again? Today you were supposed to help me in the garden! The earth must be dug up. Have you forgotten that?”

“No,” Jupiter said to the answering machine. “But I left you a note, Aunt Mathilda... Swimming practice. I guess that’s the kind of thing you usually overlook...”

The next message on the answering machine was from Kelly, Pete’s girlfriend. She asked if he’d take her to the movies on Saturday night. She would then get the tickets.

“What’s there to see?” Jupiter asked his friend.

Pete looked up from the periscope. He still hadn’t seen Bob. “All on one night—*Psycho*, *The Birds* and *Vertigo*.”

“Not bad. I hope you catch the third one.”

“What do you mean?”

Jupiter smiled. For a few weeks, everything was fine between Kelly and Pete and they were smooching all over.

There was a third message on the answering machine. "Probably Aunt Mathilda again, who had found the note and now wants to apologize," he suspected.

But then an unknown female voice came out. The woman sounded a little insecure. "Hello... this is Meg Baker. I need some help. It's about... jellyfish... yes, those horrible sea creatures! How can I possibly describe it? Oh, I hate leaving messages... uh... I received an e-mail and the jellyfish was hidden in it. And now they are all over in my computer! Shocking! You can't imagine... You're investigators, right? I got your number from an acquaintance of mine you helped once. I really need to talk to you. Please call me back soon!" She gave a phone number. Then the recording stopped.

Jupiter looked at the display. "It's been two hours since that call," he said. "There is no time to lose. We should contact her immediately."

"Contact whom?" Suddenly the door opened and Bob came in. He'd overheard the last words, but he wasn't really interested in that. He was holding a bicycle tyre tube and his expression spoke volumes.

"When I turned the corner, I ran over a nail. Flat tyre. Fortunately only in the front tyre. You really could have waited for me!" Bob looked so upset that Jupiter had to laugh.

"We'll deal with your bike later. Looks like we have a new case. A Miss Baker left a message on the answering machine said something about jellyfish appearing all over in her computer."

Bob stared at Jupe as if he had just announced that aliens had landed. "Jellyfish in the computer? These flabby, transparent sea creatures which I'm always afraid of when I go swimming in the ocean? The lady must have confused her computer with an aquarium."

"How funny," replied Jupiter. "She sounded more like she felt threatened."

"Sounds really pretty weird," Pete interjected. "It's just a computer virus. She caught it in an e-mail and now it's messing with her computer. She needs a computer expert more than she needs us."

"Someone like Tom." Jupiter pinched his lower lip.

Tom Wood was a classmate who was very quiet, but basically okay. Outside of school, he seemed to spend every minute with his computer. From time to time, he sent Jupiter strange e-mails, which were obviously meant to be fun. In fact, he sent more e-mails than he talked.

"Didn't Tom once own a fish tank?" Bob asked.

"Right! Back when he used to mess with live fish," Jupe said. "Now everything is purely virtual in his computer so he doesn't have to feed anything."

"Well, call that Miss Baker," Bob suggested decisively. "Then we'll hear more about the jellyfish."

This reminded Jupiter that the caller had asked for an immediate call back. He picked up the phone and dialled. He did not have to wait long.

A woman answered. "Yes?"

"This is Jupiter Jones of The Three Investigators. To whom am I speaking?" asked Jupiter.

"Baker... Meg Baker."

"Good. I'm calling you back because you asked for our help, Miss Baker. You said something about... a jellyfish?"

The woman was silent for a moment. "That... is true. I'm being attacked by a jellyfish virus. But I don't need you anymore. I just hired another detective. I've got his contact from

an ad in the mailbox. Sorry, but you were too late.”

Jupiter swallowed. “Excuse me,” he started stammering in surprise. “We were... we’re just busy people.”

“Detectives have to be there when you need them,” the woman stated categorically.

“Miss Baker, that’s exactly what we want to do!” Jupiter replied. “As soon as we got back, we checked our answering machine and called you back immediately.” He wasn’t going to give up on the case like that.

“We can go see you now, if you give us a chance,” Jupiter said.

“Okay, but Mr Perry will also be here.”

“May I ask for your address?” Jupiter asked.

“29 Barlington Road.”

“You would regret it very much if you did not at least let us try to help you,” Jupiter said. “We will be with you in a few minutes! We promise.” With one look at his two friends, Juve made sure that this was what they also wanted. Pete and Bob nodded but Bob a little more hesitant than Pete, because he wanted to get his bicycle tyre fixed.

“Very well,” said Miss Baker after a brief pause. “Your tenacity convinces me. You’ll get a chance. Whoever gets here first will have the case!”

“Well, let’s get going,” cried Jupiter after he had put down the phone. He stuffed his T-shirt down his pants. “Pete, we’re taking your car.”

“It’s in the shop for service,” Pete said.

“Then Bob, even if it’s slower.”

“My Beetle is parked at home.”

“The bikes, then!”

Bob pointed wordlessly at the flat bicycle tube.

Jupiter threw a tantrum. “What a terrible mess! Uncle Titus is out, so I can’t get his vehicle. We’re not gonna get this new case, unless Pete and I cycle there!”

“No!” Bob replied firmly. “We are a team!”

Pete also wanted Bob to be there. With Jupiter, one never knew what ideas he would come up with. At least, with both Pete and Bob, they could sometimes dissuade Juve from the really crazy and dangerous plans.

“You can have my bike,” Pete offered Bob. “I’ll run there.”

“Then let’s go,” Juve urged his friends. “We have no time to lose!”

2. Race for the Job

It was still very hot outside. After about two hundred metres, Pete was annoyed with his own suggestion. He had taken a long shower after his swimming training session in the morning. Normally he was a good endurance runner, but the swimming had cost him a lot of energy. He was no longer fresh, and he felt very tired. Jupiter and Bob were far ahead. Pete had to increase his pace to catch up.

“Barlington Road?” Pete thought to himself. “I could take a shortcut there.” He jumped over a fence and crossed a former pasture, which was now a dry wasteland. As he squeezed through the wire mesh to the other side, his T-shirt got caught on a sharp point and tore. But now was not the time to get angry about it.

Unimpressed, the Second Investigator continued jogging through a small side street and caught the number 64 bus at the corner, which took him past three stops. Now it was only about four hundred metres left.

Again and again, Miss Baker’s message played in his mind—she probably just received some computer virus that displayed jellyfish. But first of all, they had to compete with another detective for the case—whoever gets to Miss Baker first will get the case! As it is, he could very well be the one to clinch the job for The Three Investigators!

When the house number 29 came into sight, he noticed that a mouse-grey Ford was parked in front of the small, detached house. That must belong to Mr Perry, the other detective! Pete released the last of his strength.

A small, chubby man got out of the car. He took short steps on the path towards the garden gate of Miss Baker’s house. The Second Investigator turned around and there was no sign of Jupiter or Bob, so he had to step on it. Now it was a matter of seconds. His legs were already so heavy that he could no longer control his movements precisely. But Pete still managed to step up a gear. The man was already half the way to the gate. With his eyes firmly fixed on the garden gate, Pete sprinted.

Now Mr Perry turned and noticed the Second Investigator and he immediately quickened his pace. Pete was already there, but it was too late to stop. Right in front of the garden gate he collided with the man with full force. They clashed and both fell to the ground.

Sweating, the man pulled himself up. His shirt had slipped out of his pants. “Can’t you be careful! What are you trying to do, you drunken rascal!” He pulled air through his nose as if he had a cold and looked at Pete angrily.

The Second Investigator also straightened up. He was still out of breath, but had to grin about the embarrassing collision. He held out his hand and said: “Pete Crenshaw of The Three Investigators. Please excuse the circumstances of our meeting.” Even Jupiter Jones, who was always responsible for such pompous manner of speaking, could not have expressed it more beautifully.

The man angrily tucked his shirt into his pants and tapped off the dust. His eyes flashed. “What are you doing here? I’m Dick Perry, Santa Monica Detective Agency.”

Pete had never heard of this detective agency before. It was probably made up of one person—Dick Perry himself. Then he heard the sound of two bicycles braking and took a

deep breath of relief. At last, backup was here. Jupiter and Bob parked the bikes and came closer.

“Jupiter Jones of The Three Investigators,” Jupe introduced himself.

“Bob Andrews,” Bob did likewise.

Dick Perry winked at the boys suspiciously. “So The Three Investigators, huh? Your reputation has reached Santa Monica. But unless you just happened to be here, remember this is my case. Miss Baker has already hired me. Do you know my slogan? ‘Want to sort out your mess? With Dick Perry, you’ll have success!’” He laughed shrilly.

“Miss Baker has changed her mind now,” Jupiter said dryly. “She will give the job to whomever gets to her first. And if I look at the situation, Pete was here before you.”

“This is a huge mistake!” Mr Perry cried.

“I’m closer to the garden gate,” Pete claimed and imperceptibly took a step forward.

But Mr Perry had seen it and was about to come up with an appropriate answer when the front door opened and Miss Baker appeared. She was a dark-haired woman of about fifty years of age and it looked as if she was going to end the incipient argument without delay.

“Come in, gentlemen,” she cried sternly, “or one of my neighbours will call the police! And please, not so loud. We’ll settle everything over a cup of tea.”

The four detectives looked at each other in amazement. Pete was the first to take the initiative and start moving. But he didn’t get very far, because next to Miss Baker sat a small dog that nobody had noticed before. The little dog growled at Pete threateningly.

“All right, Harry,” Miss Baker hissed and the dog sat down obediently, but never let Pete out of his sight.

Pete squeezed past the dog and he noticed that the woman was critically examining his torn T-shirt. Jupiter and Bob followed Pete, and finally Mr Perry joined them. They came into a house that had already seen its best years.

Jupiter immediately noticed the strange decorations—sea animals, diving masks, harpoons, pictures of coral reefs, fish and a shark. There were several pictures and drawings of sunken ships from past and present times. So Miss Baker was particularly fond of shipwrecks.

Miss Baker led her visitors into the living room and asked them to sit down. The Three Investigators found a place on the sofa, which seemed to have come from another century and was covered with a fabric of small fish patterns. Mr Perry sank into the matching armchair with a groan and pulled air through his nose again.

Miss Baker had heard it and looked at him disapprovingly. Then she directed her dog to lie down on a mat. She took some cups out of the cupboard and put them on the coffee table. Her gaze was fixed, but there was a slight uneasiness in it. Her clothes looked sporty, but completely out of fashion. Jupiter noticed that despite the heat, she was wearing a shirt with long sleeves and wide long trousers. His thoughts wandered to another point—he had noticed that Pete, with his torn T-shirt and sweaty face, had not exactly scored any plus points with Miss Baker. How could they convince the woman that they were better detectives than Dick Perry? It wasn’t easy to find the right way to get started.

“Do you live here alone?” he said hesitantly.

Miss Baker nodded. “For ten years, yes. Tea, gentlemen?” Miss Baker looked around questioningly. “You all drink tea, don’t you?”

“Why, yes,” Bob explained. “At least the three of us.”

“And you?” Miss Baker turned to Dick Perry.

“I love tea,” Perry said. Jupiter could sense that Perry would have liked something else, but obviously he didn’t want to attract attention immediately.

Miss Baker went into the kitchen. Jupiter's gaze wandered to their rival. Dick Perry was an inconspicuous, stocky man, considerably shorter than Jupiter. He dressed a bit grubby. Jupiter thought that his detective agency could not be run particularly well. He probably needed money. The man would have a hard time backing down when it came to Miss Baker's job, and Jupiter wouldn't back down as well. He was far too curious to give in, and he had The Three Investigators' reputations at stake.

Perry felt Jupe's gaze and bent over. "This is my job, you understand?" he said. "You're just a bunch of part-time amateur detectives. My advice to you is to look for stray cats, lost parrots, and the like, but don't interfere in the affairs of professionals!"

Before any of The Three Investigators could react, Miss Baker returned from the kitchen with a tray. She served the tea and sat down in the last chair available.

Jupiter was determined to take the initiative before Dick Perry. "You love the sea, Miss Baker. I bet you go diving a lot."

Miss Baker looked at him in surprise. "Why, yes, how did you know...?"

Mr Perry coughed and interrupted her. "Well, that's not so hard to guess even for a boy, Miss Baker. The pictures, the sea decorations—it's a simple and logical connection. It stands to reason that you would dive." Then he pulled a tattered pad out of his pocket and took some notes. Jupiter guessed that he wanted to look professional.

"But I haven't been diving for a good week," Miss Baker added with a bitter undertone in her voice. "I may never dive again."

"Because of the jellyfish?" Bob immediately concluded.

Miss Baker's face became serious. "That's right," she replied. "You deduce very fast!"

This resulted in another cough from Mr Perry. He didn't like Miss Baker's praise for Bob.

"Because of the jellyfish, of course," he said frantically. "Of course. Miss Baker, you were talking on the phone about the jellyfish virus you received by e-mail. You're not diving anymore. There's no question—perfectly logical. That's why you came to me for help."

Miss Baker looked at him with a frown and Jupiter had to grin.

This point had gone to The Three Investigators. So Jupiter ventured a step further. "Miss Baker, I suspect you had an incident with a jellyfish while diving." That had to be the connection. He had hit the mark.

With a sudden trembling hand, Miss Baker put the teacup back on the table. "That's right," she began. Her voice had lost all self-assurance. "It's only been a few days. I was diving for a sunken boat at Seagull Rock. You may know this small reef not far from shore. Less than two weeks ago, a fishing boat sank there in the fog at night. It was called *Cutty Shark*, and, uh... well, I don't want to give too much away."

The Three Investigators nodded. The incident had been the talk of the town for a short time. Only with a lot of luck had the captain been able to escape from the stormy floods.

Miss Baker went on. "I went diving with Betty... Betty Sutton," She looked at Jupiter and then around. "What a joy it is to have met this nice woman! You must know that I live a very private life and many people avoid me. Maybe I'm a little strange—that may be so, and I haven't lived here for long either. In any case, gentlemen, you cannot imagine how pleased I was when it turned out that Betty and I have so many common interests. If you must know, she works at Waterworld and she loves diving!" Miss Baker cleared her throat.

"Since I was divorced from my husband, my life has not exactly been made easier. Although, of course, I was glad to be away from Doggy. He was just stuck in too many sleazy dealings. I couldn't stand it anymore. It was too much for me. Well, I'm rid of him now."

“What was that about the dive again?” Perry brought her back to the real issue.

Miss Baker nodded obediently. “Oh, yes, I’m sorry. One thing at a time... So we dived, and suddenly I couldn’t see Betty. I thought she’d gone down into the wreck and I was trying to follow her.”

Now Mr Perry saw his chance. “That’s when the jellyfish attacked!” he said in between.

“Oh, no, Mr Perry. You’re confusing this with science fiction novels. Jellyfish have no ability to attack. They float in water. They’re not usually dangerous.”

The Santa Monica detective didn’t like that answer and he grimaced.

“Anyway, I dived towards the wreck,” Miss Baker continued. “There was a huge hole in the side of the boat, probably from the impact with the rocks. I thought Betty might have gone through that, so I swam forward. Without shining a light into it, I went through the opening. And there was I, among them...”

Miss Baker had squeezed the last words out of her. She was trembling. “Hundreds of little jellyfish. They were everywhere!” she cried. “Jellyfish with a strong venom. I got caught in them and got stung really badly. I panicked!”

With a jerk, the woman pulled up one of her sleeves. “Look here!”

The Three Investigators stared at her arm which was covered with red welts.

Then Miss Baker stuck out a leg and pulled her trousers up. “And here!” The skin was a single inflamed red web.

3. Virus by E-Mail

Miss Baker pushed her sleeves and trousers back down. "This will be with me for a while," she moaned. "All over, the hideous jellyfish filaments stuck to my skin and burnt me with their venom. I didn't have a wet suit on to protect me. The sea is not very deep there."

The Three Investigators were silent and Mr Perry also preferred not to comment on this.

Miss Baker continued with her report: "The worst is yet to come! I reacted with an allergic shock from the venom. I, um... I couldn't help myself. I couldn't move. Unconscious, I was stuck in the black hole. If Betty hadn't come, I would have..." She sighed but stopped short of speaking.

"So Betty saved you?" Jupiter surmised.

Miss Baker nodded.

"She hadn't swum into the hole of the boat at all," Jupiter added. "She was just out of your sight."

"Yes, Jupiter. You said it. Luckily, she found me and brought me safely ashore. Then an ambulance took me to the hospital. The local newspaper even ran a small story about it."

Satisfied, Jupiter leaned back. He had shown Miss Baker how well he could think. Perhaps that was an advantage when it came to getting the case. The First Investigator could not help but smile mischievously at Dick Perry. He stared back angrily.

Miss Baker took a breath of air to continue speaking, but immediately Mr Perry bent over and said: "Miss Baker, I understand now. You never want to dive again after that terrible incident. Such a perilous situation simply leaves its mark!"

Miss Baker turned to him and nodded, but before she could explain the situation in more detail, Jupiter quickly stepped in: "But a psychological treatment could help you!"

Miss Baker turned her head back and opened her mouth, but before a word came out, Mr Perry snapped: "But it's more than just your fear! Any contact with these jellyfish could trigger the allergic shock reaction again and endanger your life! Isn't that right?"

Miss Baker swallowed and nodded. She was all slumped over.

Jupiter looked at Mr Perry with sparkling eyes. Perry was right in his assumption. But the First Investigator would have liked to have presented that point himself.

"Miss Baker, you mentioned something about an e-mail on the phone," Jupe asked.

"Oh, yes!" the lady said. "A few days after that dreadful attack, I received an e-mail. Then these jellyfish started to appear on my computer. That can't possibly be a coincidence. The e-mail seemed to be a follow-up to the jellyfish attack. I think someone is out to get me and I do not know why... That's why I contacted you."

But Miss Baker obviously wanted to put the detectives to the test. "Perhaps, I should first ask you to tell me how do you intend to proceed with this case."

Mr Perry hesitated and Jupiter grabbed the opportunity. "At this time, the only lead is the e-mail. We need to find out who is behind it... and why."

The lady nodded.

"So we'll take a look at your computer first," Jupiter suggested.

"So? Are you guys computer experts too?" Perry interrupted him immediately and turned to Miss Baker. "Fake e-mails, dangerous computer viruses, these are not things to be taken

lightly! Look, I'm a professional. I've dealt with computer crime before."

Miss Baker looked up with interest. "Ah, yes. And on what cases?"

"Well," Perry mumbled and pulled the air through his nose, "I can't, of course, tell you what happened... client confidentiality, you know." He swallowed, then changed his facial expression and confidently added: "You don't want me telling other people about your case, do you?"

Miss Baker seemed to think so. "And you?" she asked The Three Investigators. "Are you also... professionals?"

Bob and Pete looked at each other helplessly. Of course they weren't. But Jupiter kept his nerve. "We work closely with Tom Wood," he explained. "One of our classmates who is a whiz at computers."

"A classmate?" With a scornful shrug of the shoulders, Dick Perry turned away.

Jupiter tried to ignore Perry's reaction. "Do you have any idea who sent you the e-mail?" he asked Miss Baker.

Miss Baker's voice became thin. "I can see where the e-mail was sent from, but I think that was just a cover. There's someone else behind this... and I can guess who. But, gentlemen, before I decide who gets the job, I am not expressing any suspicion. If I do, the word will get around like wildfire and it'll just be another story that the wacky Meg Baker put it all together."

"Why don't you go to the police?" Pete asked. He ignored the insinuation that they or Mr Perry might reveal her suspicion to other people.

"I believe the police have other things to do than look for the senders of malicious e-mails." Miss Baker shook her head. "They would only laugh at me. So, no police."

Dick Perry nodded understandingly and asked quickly: "So who was the sender of this e-mail?"

"Bert's Bar. I thought, what do they want from me. So I opened the attachment to the e-mail, but there was only their menu in it."

"A beach café is behind this?" Bob asked incredulously. "But why?"

"That's the odd thing," Miss Baker thought. "I don't know anyone there. I think that was just a cover. But I don't know enough about it. It's your job, gentlemen. Find out who is behind the jellyfish!"

"Then let's have a look at your computer," Jupiter urged. He looked around searching. "Where is it?"

Miss Baker pointed her finger at the next room. "Over there... The password is 'Harry'. But I apologize if I can't accompany you. I simply can't stand the sight of those dreadful creatures."

The Three Investigators nodded and stood up. Dick Perry pushed himself between them, and together they entered the room adjacent to the living room.

It was Meg Baker's study. Jupiter's eyes fell on meticulously arranged filing cabinets and a spick-and-span desk. She had a sense of order.

On the computer table next to the window was the said device. Mr Perry tried to get past The Three Investigators with an unfair use of his elbows, but Bob and Pete blocked him so Jupiter could sit in peace in front of the screen. The other three stood behind him while Miss Baker remained seated on her armchair in the living room.

"Well, let's have a look," Jupiter said and switched the machine on. He was not really afraid of jellyfish, at least not virtual ones. Nevertheless, he flinched when the desktop appeared—a pinkish shimmering jellyfish in close-up.

“Had the wallpaper been changed before?” Jupiter cried back into the living room. “It does look like a jellyfish.”

“No. It all started after I clicked on the e-mail attachment,” Miss Baker said.

“I thought so. Even the cursor is a jellyfish,” Jupiter noted.

“The cursor? So how did it happen?” exclaimed Miss Baker, startled.

“By clicking the e-mail attachment, your computer has caught a virus, and now this jellyfish keeps popping up all over the screen.”

“Then what about my files?”

Jupiter heard Miss Baker push the chair back and get up. But it was too late. He had already launched the e-mail program. Just as Miss Baker pushed her way between Bob and Dick Perry, the screen split in half and masses of jellyfish sprang up from a black hole. The sounds that came out of the speakers could make anyone’s hair stand on end. Finally, the whole screen was a jumble of small, slippery creatures.

Miss Baker was gasping for breath. She raised her hands to her throat and made a choking sound. Then she passed out. Luckily, Bob was just able to catch her, or the woman would have hit the shelves.

“It really knocked her out. We put her on the couch,” Pete said quickly. Determined, he took the woman’s legs while Bob reached under her armpits. Miss Baker was not exactly a lightweight. To make matters worse, Miss Baker’s dog had come into the study and jumped up to Pete, snarling and baring his teeth. With his leg, he could just about keep him at bay.

Suspiciously, Dick Perry followed the action. No one noticed in the excitement that Jupiter had been sitting quietly at the computer.

Bob and Pete carefully laid Miss Baker down on the couch. Then Bob went into the kitchen to fetch some water. It was only in the third cupboard that he found a bowl big enough. Meanwhile, Pete had gone to look for the telephone. Finally, he found it in the hallway. Just as he was about to enter the number of the emergency service, he heard a babble of voices from the living room and returned.

Miss Baker had regained consciousness. Her dog had sat down on the sofa and licked all over her face.

Dick Perry knelt beside the couch and held Miss Baker’s hand. “Hello, Miss Baker, hello,” he purred. “Wonderful! You’re with us again!”

“Thank you,” she said in a weak voice. “Mr Perry, you saved me.”

“You’re welcome. That’s my job too.”

“What happened?”

“You saw the jellyfish on the computer and fainted. And I laid you down gently on the couch here. Luckily, you have a man with a lot of experience and not these three rascals.”

Pete didn’t think he heard that right. It was the most outrageous lie he had heard in a long time. He cleared his throat distinctly. “We saved you, Miss Baker,” he said aggressively.

Miss Baker waved it off. “Now, don’t go arguing again—as long as I’m still alive.”

Shaking his head, Pete remained silent. At that moment, Bob came back from the kitchen and Perry took the water bowl from him.

Under the surprised looks of Bob, he drizzled a few drops on Miss Baker’s forehead and carefully rubbed them in. “Does that feel good, Miss Baker?”

The woman breathed more heavily. “Thank you, I’m fine,” she gasped and sat up. “Very thoughtful, Mr Perry. Did you finally turn off the computer?”

Dick Perry looked around. Only now did he notice that Jupiter was still in the study.

“I’ll turn it off now, Miss Baker,” the First Investigator announced himself as if on cue. “It’ll take a while to shut down!” A short time later, he stepped into the room.

Miss Baker impatiently waved her visitors to her. “Now you have all seen it! Someone is trying to do me harm! I almost died of the shock at the wrecked boat. Now it’s a follow-up attack by e-mail! Go find the culprit!” She moaned and grabbed her dog, which by now was licking the water from the bowl, slobbering all over the sofa. “What are you waiting for? Find the culprit!”

The four detectives looked at each other.

“Oh, yes, I have to choose one of you...” Miss Baker reached for her cup absently and took a sip of tea. “With so many detectives, I get all mixed up,” she muttered.

“I think one is enough,” Dick Perry seized his chance. “Take me—the professional... and get rid of all these newbies.”

“Well, what is your fee, Mr Perry?” Miss Baker asked.

Dick Perry was obviously uncomfortable being the first to answer. Finally, he came up with a figure that was customary.

Miss Baker then turned to Jupiter. The leader of The Three Investigators had only been waiting for this. “We don’t take fees, Miss Baker,” he said with a smile. “Your satisfaction is our reward.”

“That’s the last straw!” Dick Perry thumped away. “No fee? You’ll ruin the business! What am I supposed to live on? I... I have to pay for my office, my expenses... and if this keeps up, I’ll have to sell my little boat, the only fun I have left in life!” He took a breath. “Miss Baker, a detective who costs nothing is worth nothing!”

Miss Baker winced and reached for her teacup. She seemed visibly moved. “Well, gentlemen... I... will now make up my mind.”

Dick Perry put on a cramped smile. “Yeah?”

Miss Baker, unmoved, took a sip of the now cold tea. “I’d like to give the case to a respectable person,” she said slowly and took a second sip.

“The fee is not a big deal to me. I just want the case solved...” She looked at Dick Perry, who instantly broadened his smile. “You have been so kind to help me through my predicament. And I hope you know as much about computers as you claim. Find out who sent me the mean jellyfish...”

“Dick Perry, you’re hired!”

4. Tracing the Jellyfish Sender

Disappointment was written all over the faces of The Three Investigators. Listlessly, the boys trotted through the entrance gate of The Jones Salvage Yard.

After Jupiter and Bob had parked the bicycles, they continued to mope with Pete. Now all that was missing was one of Aunt Mathilda's dreaded work assignments to keep The Three Investigators from a hearty argument about the guilt of failure.

The door to the salvage yard office was already opening in the face of disaster. But surprisingly, Mathilda was in a good mood. "Well, grumpy investigators," she asked cheerfully. "Well, come on in. I went to the supermarket and bought a family pack of ice cream. Come get it now!"

The boys didn't need to be told twice. A few minutes later, they were sitting at the table, scooping spoonfuls of the finest vanilla ice cream off their plates. It was a small consolation, at least.

After gobbling up the first helping, Jupiter asked his aunt if she knew a certain Meg Baker. "Maybe she was at one of your coffee parties or something."

"Coffee parties?" Mathilda Jones pulled down the corners of her mouth in indignation. "Those are well-organized meetings on topical issues! The other day, we talked about the new bus line, which will provide better connections to—"

"Aunt Mathilda," Jupiter interrupted her gently. "Meg Baker?"

"Meg Baker, yes. Of course, she was a topic of conversation. You don't see her much in Rocky Beach. She's a little quirky, that woman. I guess it's because she lives so isolated and alone. She moved to Rocky Beach after she was divorced. It hasn't been that long—a couple of years... wait a minute..."

"Who was her husband?" Jupiter asked in between.

"I don't know," Aunt Mathilda replied laughing. "Listen, I'm not an information bureau. No, all I know is that she is supposed to have a lot of money that came from her parents who were in the movie business. But she doesn't spend it or she doesn't show it. The house she lives in is, from the outside, rather plain."

"True. We know it," Jupiter let it slip out.

"You know it? So instead of working in the garden, you went to visit Miss Baker!" Aunt Mathilda shook her head. "Another case for you investigators? Well, if that's more fun for you... I've done all the gardening. If you don't want to help, then I'll do the work myself! Anyway, it's better this way. Gardening is a great way to balance out the stresses of life." She beamed at the boys. "It seems to me that would have been good for you too. She was a difficult lady, wasn't it?"

Bob muttered something incomprehensible. However, to Jupiter, there was something in his aunt's sermon that made him sit up and take notice. 'Then I'll do the work myself,' she had said.

After his aunt disappeared into the living room, Jupiter pushed his ice cream bowl aside. "Pete and Bob, watch this! We'll solve Miss Baker's case anyway! We'll do the work ourselves... and we'll show her that we're better detectives by beating that sleazy Perry to the punch."

Pete looked at him doubtfully. "That's a nice idea, but I don't think Perry is as stupid as you think he is." He vividly recalled the scene where that detective had pretended to save Miss Baker and had fooled The Three Investigators.

"And besides, we have zero information," Bob pointed out. "Where should we start? We can't get to Miss Baker's computer again."

"We don't need to." Jupiter triumphed. "I did it all when you left me alone in her study."

"What were you doing at her computer?" Pete asked.

"Do not say anything," Jupiter said. "I know I should have asked Miss Baker for permission, but in a way... she did ask for our help. With that annoying Dick Perry competing with us, I had to gain an advantage over him."

"Tell us about it, Jupe," Pete asked.

"The jellyfish virus on Miss Baker's computer is actually only a display that constantly keeps popping up, interfering with operations," Jupe explained. "With the short time I had there and as far as I know, the virus did not destroy any files or programs. It was just annoying, but I managed to get to her e-mail program and I forwarded the jellyfish e-mail to Tom... I asked if he could help us find the real jellyfish sender. The address given is certainly a dummy address. Of course, I've added a comment to ensure he doesn't open the attachment carelessly or his computer will be affected."

"And now Tom has the jellyfish e-mail?" Pete asked. "Why didn't you also forward a copy to us at headquarters?"

"I wanted to, but the jellyfish kept popping up. By that time, Miss Baker was asking about turning off her computer," Jupe explained. "Anyway, priority was to make sure Tom got to check that e-mail first. You two saw that Perry guy for yourselves. If we're gonna take him on, we're gonna have to step on it. So what do you think? Shall we investigate?"

Pete and Bob exchanged a look. Dick Perry had really annoyed them... and The Three Investigators had a lead that Dick Perry may not have known about. They agreed.

"We will solve the case," cried Bob. "We'll find the jellyfish sender and we'll do it before Dick Perry!"

And Pete added: "Tell the flabby bag to get ready for something." He faltered. "Sorry, Jupe, nothing against fat people."

But Jupiter forgave everything at the moment. He shone. The friends were there, the case could begin. Immediately he stood up and went to the phone. He wanted to call Tom to see if he had found anything out yet. But Tom Wood was not at home. So the boys decided to go to Headquarters to send Tom another e-mail for safety's sake.

When they walked out of the salvage yard office, there was a nice surprise waiting for them—Uncle Titus had repaired Bob's bike. He also offered them to look through a few boxes of CDs and put prices on them—a task that was usually a boss's job. But Titus Jones did not know enough about the newer music. The Three Investigators had been waiting for this for a long time, especially Bob, who himself had an impressive CD collection. As a reward, they could each get a music CD.

In between, they kept calling Tom's house but nobody answered. So after the work, they took care of Aunt Mathilda's sumptuous dinner. After that, they hoped Tom would be home. But even in the evening, nobody answered the phone.

"Strange," Bob wondered. "Tomorrow morning we have to turn in an important essay, and Tom would have a lot to do. Jupe, you know him best. He even talks to you once in a while. What do you think is going on?"

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. "He's probably off somewhere. I don't know him well enough to know where else he hangs out. Anyway, how are you two preparing for the essay?"

Jupiter smugly registered how Pete's gaze quickly shifted to the ceiling and Bob looked attentively at the tip of his thumb. Around 10 pm, the three decided to call it a day.

Jupiter withdrew into his house while Bob and Pete swung themselves onto their bikes. Tom's house wasn't exactly in the direction that Pete and Bob had to go, but they still made the detour. Maybe he was at home after all and just didn't answer the phone.

But the small house where Tom lived with his mother was dark. The garage was open and there was no car in it.

"Gone out?" Pete, who had rung the doorbell, got back on his bike.

"We'll see him tomorrow at eight at the latest," Bob said.

Suddenly Pete had a strange feeling. "I hope so," he mumbled.

5. Another Case for Dick Perry

When the English teacher entered the class, everyone was sitting in their seats expectantly—all except Tom Wood. Mr Barnes frowned. “Tom, of all people, could have really needed this assignment for a better grade. Does anyone know where he might be?”

Nobody knew anything. Even five minutes later, when the teacher had distributed the task, Tom was still not there. Restlessly, The Three Investigators slid back and forth on their chairs. They could not just go look for Tom. The next break would be at 9:30 am.

Pete’s thoughts kept wandering away from the quite interesting topic of the essay assignment. The rest of the class had got used to Tom just being there, but strictly speaking, they didn’t really know him. This was not only because he spent every free minute in front of his computer. Tom was kind of a loner. Only Jupiter had developed a cautious relationship with him.

Pete stared at his half-written page. It was unfounded, even insane, but he couldn’t get rid of the thought that there was a connection between Jupiter’s e-mail and Tom’s disappearance. He turned to the First Investigator who was sitting diagonally behind him and who was unaware of Pete’s gaze. He saw Jupiter writing line after line on his sheet of paper without pausing for a second. Before the teacher noticed Pete, he bent over his sheet of paper again.

By nine o’clock, half an hour early, Pete had written his final sentence. He raised his arm and Mr Barnes came to his table.

“Can I leave now?” whispered Pete.

Looking at the other students, Barnes muttered: “When you are done...”

“I’m done!” Pete handed in the essay, quickly sought the glances of Jupiter and Bob and left the classroom. He didn’t have to wait three minutes outside the class, when his two friends were there as well.

“I was far from finished,” complained the First Investigator. But he also knew that they urgently needed to check on Tom.

They swung onto their bikes and pedalled hard. A few minutes later, they turned into the street where Tom and his mother lived. Pete was relieved to discover that Mrs Wood’s car was now parked outside their house. But then he realized that the car did not explain Tom’s absence from school, on the contrary, it was a cause for further concern because he and his mother had obviously not gone away.

The Three Investigators locked their bicycles and let Jupiter go ahead. Before he pressed the bell, the First Investigator turned around. “The front door is ajar,” he said in surprise.

Suddenly, they heard voices inside. “That’s—” Pete gasped in horror.

“Dick Perry,” Bob added. “What is he doing here?”

“I wish you every success, Mr Perry. Please find Tom for me.” That was the voice of Tom’s mother. She sounded desperate.

“I’ll do everything I can for you,” Perry replied. “Calm yourself, Mrs Wood. You were lucky. The best detective in the region is working for you.” At that moment, he pushed the door open and stepped out. Immediately, he saw The Three Investigators. The shock gave way to a broad grin.

“Oh, the three rookies! I’m sorry, you were late. This case is now mine too!”

“What are you doing here?” Jupiter hissed at him.

Dick Perry, still in the same shirt as the day before, turned his grin into a superior smile. “I wanted to check out Tom, your friend—whether he even exists and whether he is really as fit on the computer as you claim.” He was pulling air through his nose. “Miss Baker had some concerns about my computer skills. Of course, her doubts are completely unfounded... and I would have liked to tell her that you exaggerated excessively yesterday. The only thing is that you don’t seem to have lied about your friend Tom, seeing all the equipment sitting around in his room! So Tom is a computer whiz, but there’s no need for that now. Oh what am I telling you this... I am not accountable to you!” He started to move away.

In the meantime, Mrs Wood was standing at the doorway. Perry turned to her and said: “A word of advice, Mrs Wood, throw these rookies out right away! This case is now in the best hands!” He turned to face The Three Investigators and gritted his teeth. “Goodbye, gentlemen.”

“What do you want?” Tom’s mother carefully asked The Three Investigators. She dried a tear from the corner of her eye. “Did you have anything to do with Tom’s disappearance?” Obviously, she didn’t recognize Jupiter, who hadn’t stopped by the Woods that much. Bob and Pete had never seen her before anyway.

The First Investigator took the floor and explained that they were classmates of Tom. Tom was absent from English class today.

“That’s amazing that anyone would miss Tom,” said his mother. Then tears came back to her eyes. She lost her temper. “The police were already here,” she sobbed. “Tom would never leave—not just like that. But the police... the policeman said that many parents would believe that about their children. And yet over a hundred children disappear every day and most of them are back after three days at the latest. I hope he’s right!”

“Do you have a good relationship with Tom?” Jupiter asked calmly.

“Yes,” replied Mrs Wood, who had recovered her composure. “Although I have seen him far too seldom of late. I’ve gone back to work and I’m seldom at home... and Tom is so strange.”

“Then tell us how everything happened,” Jupiter suggested. “Maybe we should sit down?” Mrs Wood nodded and led The Three Investigators into the kitchen.

6. Tom is Missing

The report from Tom's mother was brief and shocking. She had spent the evening at a friend's house. When she left the house, Tom had been sitting in front of his computer as usual. She returned around 11 pm. The light in his room was off. She thought he was already asleep so she went to bed as well. When she got up at six the next morning, she wanted to wake him up. But Tom was gone.

The bed was unused. At quarter past six, she alerted the police, who arrived at half past six. In the meantime, she had discovered that a sports bag and some clothes were missing. The two policemen took notes and told Mrs Wood not to get so upset. The boy was at a critical age, and they had cases of juvenile runaways almost every day. Nothing could be done for the time being. At Mrs Wood's request, they examined the door and found no sign of a break-in. The police left just before 7:30 am. Ten minutes later, Dick Perry showed up and asked to see Tom.

Mrs Wood told him in a fit of hysteria that Tom had disappeared. The detective then examined Tom's room more thoroughly than the police did and also checked all windows and doors on the ground floor for signs of burglary. But he found nothing.

Eventually, Mrs Wood asked him to find Tom. That was the state of affairs. The Three Investigators had listened carefully to the report. They had some questions about it, but they had to put them on hold.

First Jupiter had to explain something: "Mrs Wood, we also run a successful detective agency. I think we are better than that Mr Perry. We are very interested in helping you and finding your son."

Bob presented Mrs Wood with the business cards of The Three Investigators. It said:



Mrs Wood looked at the card with surprise. "It's all right with me," she said. "The more people looking for Tom, the better."

"Fine. May we start right away and check Tom's room?" Jupiter asked.

Mrs Wood nodded and led The Three Investigators to the first floor. Tom's room was just to the right of the stairs. It was the normal room of a boy of his age—maybe a little neater than some, for example, unlike Jupiter, Tom made his bed. Anyway, Jupiter looked suspiciously and deduced that Tom had not been in that bed that night.

"Has anyone checked for fingerprints yet?" Jupiter asked. Mrs Wood shook her head. "Mr Perry looked at the closet, the desk and especially the computer."

“Did he find anything interesting?”

“Something on the computer has puzzled him.”

“What was that?”

“Well, he said that Tom removed the hard disk before he left, and he needed to find out why.”

“Tom took all the computer files with him!” Jupiter asked in horror. That could include the e-mail that Jupiter sent to him.

“Take a look for yourself,” Mrs Wood told the detectives.

“In a moment...” Jupiter hesitated. “Bob, please bring up your school bag first. I hope you have your fingerprint set with you?”

“Sure,” Bob replied, “always on duty.” He jumped down the stairs and returned moments later with the equipment.

Jupiter pointed to the computer and Bob went to work. As he applied his powder with a brush, the First Investigator wanted to know from Mrs Wood what Mr Perry had suspected.

“He said Tom had run away, but he didn’t know why. Maybe Tom was running from something. But it wasn’t a break-in, and even the missing gym bag suggests that he packed his own stuff.”

“Did he use that gym bag often?” Pete asked, apparently in passing.

Mrs Wood stared at him. “Of course...” she said slowly. “Wait... I guess if he had packed in peace, he could have taken another bag—the blue one on top of the closet. That’s his travel bag. He hated sports. He must have been in a hurry.”

In the meantime, Bob had secured the fingerprints on the computer and Jupiter proceeded to switch on the computer. As expected, it failed. Without a hard disk, nothing worked. He took a closer look at the computer—it had undoubtedly been opened and only sloppily screwed back together.

They searched Tom’s room a little more, but found no other clues. Finally, Bob asked Mrs Wood for two items which clearly had Tom’s and Mr Perry’s fingerprints on them so that he could match the prints with that on the computer.

“The prints that we found could be interesting,” Bob said. “Could your fingerprints be on the computer, Mrs Wood?”

“No, I have my own computer downstairs in my study. I never use Tom’s computer.”

Mrs Wood presented Bob with a ruler from Tom’s school bag and Mr Perry’s plastic business card. “He put it on the table and I only touched the edge,” she said.

Before Bob put the card of their competitor into a small plastic bag, he could not resist taking a look at it. It said:



Bob felt sick. ‘Dick Perry’s your guy’? What a clown! Nevertheless, he had to admit that the card could have been well-received by clients... but he liked their own card much better.

The three boys said goodbye to Mrs Wood, who briefly raised the question of fees. "You know, I don't really care what you charge, even if I don't have much money," she said. "But I want Tom back."

Jupiter reassured her. "With us, you have hired the best detectives in Rocky Beach... and we don't charge you a fee."

The Three Investigators returned directly to their headquarters after school. Bob immediately started to analyze the fingerprints. Jupiter and Pete meanwhile arranged all the facts they had learned. It remained open whether Tom had really fled from something, as Dick Perry seemed to suspect, or whether he had been kidnapped.

"The fact that he packed the next best bag could speak for both," Pete said. "So can the missing hard disk."

Jupiter was also confused. "We don't even know if Tom's disappearance really has anything to do with the e-mail I sent him. In any case, it's a setback that Tom disappeared along with the computer virus."

"And Dick Perry beat us to it—twice!" Pete remarked.

"That slime ball is a real pain in the butt anyway," Jupiter voiced his annoyance. "He should deal with cases in Santa Monica. What's he doing here in Rocky Beach?"

Pete laughed. "It's probably a perfect world in Santa Monica right now... or maybe he's tired of always having to handle the misadventures of movie stars and starlets. Instead, he's making up silly slogans. What's that again? 'Want to sort out your mess? With Dick Perry, you'll have success!' Funny, very funny!"

"Problems with burglars and blackmailers? Call The Three Investigators!" Jupiter countered and grinned again.

Bob was in their crime lab and had only half an ear to listen. Now he turned to his friends, not because of Jupiter's slogan. His smile signalled that he had stumbled upon something interesting.

"Fellas! Guess whose fingerprints were on Tom's computer?"

"Dick Perry's?" Jupiter said calmly. "He touched the computer... to investigate."

"You got it right," Bob replied. "What more?"

Pete shouted annoyingly: "Just tell us! Is this a quiz of something? Of course it has Tom's prints on it!"

"No. Zero points to you, Pete."

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed Jupiter in surprise. "Wait... Let me guess... There aren't any more prints at all!"

"That's right, Juve. Ten points to you. You got it right again. That means somebody wiped the computer before Dick Perry touched it this morning."

"And this fact clearly indicates that Tom was kidnapped," Jupiter added, "for why would Tom, when he was supposedly in such a hurry, wipe the keyboard and the computer clean before he flees with the hard disk?"

"Right! And this might be done by someone else—an unknown visitor—a visitor who may have taken the hard disk." Bob was also thinking about it. "So Tom let the perpetrator in, because there was no break-in... and then the man overpowered him."

"Wait a minute..." Jupiter said. "We have not found any traces of a fight. Tom could have been held at gunpoint—by a man or a woman. Tom was asked to pack his bag and then the perpetrator went off with him."

All this gave the case a new twist. Bob came out from the crime lab and turned on the computer. "I'll scan the fingerprints on the computer so I can make a more accurate comparison."

He quickly typed in a series of passwords that the detectives used to back up their data. When he happened to look at the e-mail inbox, he cried out: "Hey! Jupe! Pete! We have e-mail! You won't believe from whom! It's an e-mail from Tom!"

7. Tom's E-Mail Reply

Surprised, Jupiter and Pete looked over Bob's shoulder. "Perhaps it's not a kidnap after all," cried Pete with relief.

"Unfortunately it doesn't mean that," Bob replied and checked the e-mail header. "He sent this e-mail last night at 9:35 pm. We had already switched off our computer."

"Open it," Jupiter said.

Bob clicked and the e-mail appeared. Then he read aloud:

Hi Jupe,

Are you on to something big? Tracing the e-mail was not easy. The supposed sender, Bert's Bar, is not the real sender, but a camouflage.

I managed to hack into the real sender's computer but I need a bit more time to confirm its location. Anyway, I took a quick look there and found two image files that might interest you. I downloaded them just before that computer went offline. See attached.

Oh man! Someone is knocking on the door downstairs. Mum's not in, so I have to go check. I'll send this to you first. Wait for my next e-mail.

Tom

"That... this..." stuttered Bob. He had a cold run down his back. "That's a first-rate piece of evidence! Tom was writing this e-mail to Jupe and downstairs, the kidnapper knocks on the door!"

Bob saved Tom's e-mail and the two image files to the hard disk and deleted it from the inbox. "Tom didn't leave on his own," he surmised. "And I'll tell you what... I think he was kidnapped because he was tracing who sent the jellyfish e-mail!"

"But like Tom said, it was not easy for him to trace the e-mail, so I presume that it is also not easy to trace who is hacking into a computer," Jupiter countered. "Luckily Tom sent the e-mail to me before he opened the door to the kidnapper. And if he deleted the e-mail right after he sent it, the kidnapper won't know that it was sent to us."

"Otherwise, we'd be in a real fix." Pete swallowed. His voice became thin. "Then we too would have unwelcome visitors!"

Jupiter, who was sometimes annoyed by Pete's anxiety, moaned. "No need to push the panic button! Nothing has happened! As I know, Tom is careful and should have deleted our e-mail."

"I'm sure he did," Bob agreed. "Tom is just great! I never thought he would be."

"But unfortunately, that was the only e-mail we received from him," Pete lamented. "We still don't know who sent the jellyfish e-mail."

But Jupe was full of zest for action. "We'll work with whatever we have at the moment, otherwise we will lose time. Let's look at the two files Tom copied from the jellyfish sender." He pushed Bob off the computer to do it himself.

The two files were named 'Gold 1' and 'Gold 2'. Jupe opened 'Gold 1' and it was a digitized photo. It seemed to be a snapshot but the photo was a bit blurred—maybe it was because of the powerful telephoto lens that had been used. A man was visible, including his face. Jupiter estimated him to be about fifty years old. He had just climbed over a kind of wooden barrier and was carrying a small, shiny case in one hand. He was dressed in a dark jacket, jeans and sports shoes. In the background of the photo there were blurred, dark lines running across from above.

The Three Investigators looked at each other questioningly. They neither knew the man nor could they figure out the background.

"I wonder if this guy is the jellyfish sender," Bob said.

"We will find out," Jupiter announced. He already had an idea how but first he wanted to know what was in the second file that Tom had sent him.

Full of expectation, he clicked on 'Gold 2'. It was a diagram. There were visible dark lines and a structure that resembled the veins of a leaf. The lines branched off several times. The three boys were disappointed because they couldn't immediately make head or tail of the diagram.

"A jellyfish?" Pete asked.

Jupiter rotated the image by 90 degrees so that the original line was at the top. "Then it would be a strange jellyfish," he said while pinching his lower lip. "Maybe a circuit diagram? Something electronic?"

"A family tree," Bob thought of that. "Only without names!"

"Not bad," said Jupiter, pointing to the screen, "but what's the point at the end of one line?"

Now it caught Bob's eye too. "Maybe he's referring to a specific person in the family tree? For example, the man in the earlier photo?"

"A connection exists, I'm sure, but what is it?" Jupiter clicked on the photo of the man again, and the three of them looked at it carefully.

"We won't get anywhere by staring," Jupiter noted soberly after a while. "In the first place, Tom found these two files in the sender's computer. In fact, we don't even know whether these two pictures have anything to do with our case!"

"Anyway, we should call Inspector Cotta and tell him that Tom has been kidnapped," Pete suggested. "We have some evidence now—from his e-mail." He was afraid that the situation was slowly slipping away from them.

Amazingly, Jupiter nodded. "Agreed. But I would prefer it if we don't say anything about our e-mail to Tom. After all, the connection between the jellyfish e-mail and his disappearance has not yet been proven."

"But how do we get on with our two puzzling pictures?" Pete asked.

"Very simple," Jupiter smiled. "The Ghost-to-Ghost e-mail Hookup!"

"Yes! We've used it before and we can use it again!" Bob remarked.

The Ghost-to-Ghost e-mail Hookup was a variation of their original Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup which employed telephone calls. In the e-mail version, The Three Investigators sent an e-mail to some of their friends requesting certain information. In this case, they would be attaching the two image files, asking them for clues. Otherwise, the recipient was requested to forward the message to as many friends as possible. Within a very short time, the request could reach many people, and it usually would not take long for one or even several of them to get back to The Three Investigators.

"The danger, of course, is that the perpetrator gets this e-mail request," Jupiter warned. "But we have to take that risk. We should try to make sure that the e-mail is only sent to

younger people and friends, and not adults.”

“And we’ll put a time limit on it,” Bob said, “otherwise the e-mail will go around the world years from now and we’ll be bombarded with responses.”

“Great idea!” Jupiter nodded. “And we propose to limit it to the greater Los Angeles area for now.”

Pete could only be enthusiastic about such a good plan. “A great idea! And what do we do in the meantime until the first responses come in?”

“We’re going to visit Betty Sutton, Miss Baker’s friend,” Jupiter announced. “After all, apart from the unknown man in the photo, she is our hottest lead!”

8. The Mauve Stinger

Jupiter phoned Inspector Cotta. He succeeded in convincing the inspector of Tom's possible kidnap without having to explain his suspicions in detail. From previous experience, Cotta knew that Jupiter would not reveal anything more if he did not want to. However, Cotta was not pleased with the news.

"I got my hands full with jewellery thefts. You probably read about it in the papers—thieves breaking into villas and hotels. Valuable items disappeared without a trace. But if you insist, I will personally contact my colleagues on the Tom Wood case."

"Please do more than that, Inspector," Jupiter asked. "Give your colleagues a big hand."

Cotta promised to do his best.

"One more thing, Inspector," Jupiter said in a husky voice.

"Yeah?"

"It is possible that in your efforts, you may encounter... well... another detective. He has also been given this case by Mrs Wood. His name is Dick Perry."

"Dick Perry? Wait... that detective from Santa Monica? Oh, yeah, I know him. Along with him and his assistant Barbara Stevens, I testified in court against an insurance scam. It's been two or three years ago, I think... He's a strange guy—a little sneaky—a trickster, but not an underrated competitor."

Jupiter swallowed.

"Well, I wonder who would solve the case first—Dick Perry or Jupiter Jones. For all you know, perhaps a certain Inspector Cotta will be the first to solve it." Cotta laughed. "Well, what do you think?"

"Well, the important thing is that Tom Wood is safe and back soon," Jupiter said quickly. In view of the detective competition from Santa Monica, he had actually wanted to ask the inspector for support, but that conversation turned out pretty messy.

Pete and Bob could not wipe off a smile. A few moments later, Jupiter had regained his composure. After all, The Three Investigators had a long success story to show for themselves and they had no need to hide from anyone—especially from Dick Perry!

Immediately, the investigators set out to locate Betty Sutton. According to Meg Baker, Betty Sutton worked at Waterworld, the ocean zoo.

Waterworld was located at the edge of Rocky Beach and attracted mainly tourists. But compared to the larger water parks and aquariums around Los Angeles, it offered comparatively fewer attractions, and it was always near to closing down. Even today, only a few cars parked on the sunny and hot forecourt.

A large sign pointed out the highlights of the aquarium—an octopus, several dolphins and a shark. The Three Investigators knew that the shark was already quite old, weak and almost toothless; and the octopus had also been a declining novelty of the zoo for years.

Suddenly Pete tugged Jupiter at his sleeve. "Look at that sign there—'Visit our special aquarium featuring the dangerous jellyfish'! The trip to Waterworld seems to become more interesting than expected!"

To avoid having to spend money on an admission ticket, Jupiter asked at the box office for Betty Sutton.

“Yeah, she is working today,” was the cashier’s succinct answer. “If you want to enter, you have to pay!”

So the boys pooled together their money and grumpily purchased three student tickets.

“Gradually we have to think about the question of fees,” complained Pete. “At the very least, we should put the costs on our client’s shoulders.”

Jupiter put his wallet in his pocket. “We get some money now and then,” he said conciliatory. “I think there’s some left in our common fund.”

“Then I’ll ask for a reimbursement,” Pete announced. “We were dragged into Waterworld several times when we were in primary school. I wouldn’t want to pay to go in now.”

They walked past a family who were admiring a small octopus. The little son knocked the glass with his toy shovel.

Jupiter pulled Bob on, who could not take his eyes off the octopus. But before the First Investigator could get outside to the dolphins, he stumbled over a bucket standing in the middle of the walkway. The bucket toppled and the water splashed onto a black backpack.

Just as Jupiter was pulling the backpack out of the puddle of water, a woman hurried up and spoke harshly to him: “Watch where you’re walking, boys!”

Her short, stringy hair clung to hair gel and she flailed about wildly with a pipe wrench. Behind the woman was an aquarium with two lonely jellyfish in it.

The woman put her arms to her hips and looked at The Three Investigators who towered over her by a good head. “Fortunately for you, my bag is waterproof!”

Jupiter ignored the remark and stepped closer to the aquarium. “Oh, really nice specimens,” he commented. “Is that the ‘mauve stinger’?”

The woman laughed. “Impressive! These creatures are a subspecies of the *Pelagia noctiluca*. In Latin, *Pelagia* means ‘of the sea’, *nocti* stands for ‘night’ and *luca* means ‘light’. Therefore *Pelagia noctiluca* can be described as a marine organism with the ability to glow in the dark. As you have mentioned, the common name is the ‘mauve stinger’.”

“But these specimens are dangerous, aren’t they?” Jupiter asked.

“They are not lethal but the sting is very painful and can leave scars, if that’s what you mean.”

Jupiter tried to overcome his spontaneous aversion to the woman and smiled at her. “You’re an expert, right?”

“I work here,” the woman replied. “Although I could imagine better things to do than repairing aquariums every day,” she added dryly.

“I’m sure you do,” Pete remarked somewhat brashly.

For The Three Investigators, there was no longer any doubt that this was the woman they were looking for.

The woman stared at him. “Tell me, what do you want anyway?”

Jupiter decided to be very direct. “I believe you’re Betty Sutton, Meg Baker’s friend,” he declared confidently. The woman flinched. “You were with Miss Baker at the wreckage of a boat a few days ago and—”

But before he could speak any further, Betty Sutton interrupted him. “You too? What’s going on today? A while ago, there was this fat, sleazy detective and now you three guys come in and poke me the same way. I got more important things to do than be involved in what you are doing—”

“Miss Sutton,” Jupiter interrupted her, “isn’t it unusual for hundreds of jellyfish to find themselves in a wrecked boat all by themselves?”

She gasped for breath. “It is also very unusual to be kept from your work by nosey people all the time.”

“Why is that tank so empty?” Jupiter pointed to the jellyfish aquarium. “Most unusual for a supposed main attraction!”

“If you must know, that’s all we have at the moment!” Miss Sutton cried. “And it’s none of your business. You know what? I think you are up to something fishy. If you’re not interested in the aquarium exhibits, please go!”

“But we paid the entrance fees,” Jupiter protested.

“Then get your money back at the ticket booth,” Betty Sutton yapped.

The woman had quite a lot of energy, Jupiter had to admit that. For the second time today, The Three Investigators retreated. What hurt them more than the harsh way Betty Sutton had confronted them was the fact that Dick Perry had been faster again—because there was no doubt who Betty referred to as a ‘fat, sleazy detective’.

“Hmm... They have only two jellyfish in the aquarium,” Jupiter said as they swung themselves onto their bikes. “Sounds mighty suspicious...”

“Other than that, there’s not much we could get from here,” Pete remarked.

“Well, we still have the two image files from Tom,” Bob said. “Hopefully, the e-mail Hookup will get us some clues...”

They hurried back to Headquarters and immediately turned on the computer... but there was only one e-mail.

Bob got the message from the inbox and read it out loud:

Hello, you Three Investigators.

I think this is a treasure map.

Charlotte

“Not much of a help though,” Pete wondered. “She is talking about the picture with the lines.”

“Treasure map sounds very mysterious,” Bob thought, “but I’m afraid this little girl has read too many pirate stories... I’ll send her a thank-you reply anyway.”

“Only what does the map depict?” Jupiter asked. “Where does the pattern fit on it?”

To give it a try, Bob got a city map of Rocky Beach on the screen and tried to superimpose the lines on it. He changed the scale several times and rotated the lines, but none of this helped. Nowhere did the drawing and the road map match each other.

Restlessly the detectives slid back and forth in their old chairs until Pete surprised them with an idea. “We could dive to the wreck,” he said, “and see if we can find anything there.”

Jupiter thought it was a good idea, better than sitting around idly. The Three Investigators had known that coastal area from childhood.

As recent as a few years ago, they had even dived at Seagull Rock to look for the remains of sunken ships and got caught up in an old pirate story. But after the mystery was revealed, the place had lost its charm, and even the sinking of the small fishing boat had only briefly attracted attention in Rocky Beach. But Meg Baker and Betty Sutton had been there, and that gave Jupiter an idea.

“Couldn’t it be that someone wants to stop Miss Baker from diving to the wreckage?” Jupiter wondered.

While Bob was shutting down the computer, he said: “That would be a new lead. So you mean if Betty Sutton is not the person we’re looking for, maybe it’s that man in the photo.”

“Betty could still be behind this,” Jupiter said.

“Then we should find something suspicious about the wreckage,” Bob suggested. “I wonder if the jellyfish are still there. In any case, we need to wear our wet suits.”

Pete looked at his watch. “Right. Let’s go to the wreckage. We should make it to the coast in about twenty minutes. Apart from our goggles, we don’t need any equipment. The water’s not deep there.”

Since the boys had kept their swimming gear at Headquarters, they had in fact, a short time later, climbed down one of the many hidden paths through the rocks. That led them to a hidden pebble bay of only a few metres wide.

Nobody was there, as most of the bathing and sunbathing people preferred the small sand bays or went straight to the big beaches of Rocky Beach. But from here, it was only about fifty metres to Seagull Rock where the boat had sunk.

While Jupiter and Bob were still putting on their wet suits, Pete inflated a small plastic boat which he had packed in case they needed it.

The Three Investigators jumped into the water, and swam out to Seagull Rock. Pete dragged the boat along. The sea was almost smooth and the water was crystal clear, so it was no problem to reach their destination safely.

Like a small lighthouse, the cutter’s mast protruded a good one metre out of the water. Directly behind it, the small reef rose out of the shallow waves. Pete tied the plastic boat to the mast with a rope so that it wouldn’t drift away in the current that prevailed here. Then he put on his diving goggles, took a breath and disappeared under the water.

Jupiter and Bob followed him. The wrecked boat lay on a slight rise on the sea bed and tilted to the side. It didn’t look very stable. It almost seemed as if it was moving back and forth in the slight underwater current.

Jupiter and Bob discovered the leak on the side of the boat which leaned towards the sea bed. Pete waved his friends over and they dived closer. A few fish fled from the unfamiliar visitors. But before The Three Investigators could reach the opening, the air ran out and the three boys had to return to the surface. They held on to the plastic boat.

Jupiter pushed up his goggles. “Pete, can you swim right into the wreck?” he asked.

“No way,” Pete replied. “I hate jellyfish.”

“But who’s the best diver among us?”

“That’s me, of course. But do I—”

“You can hold your breath for almost two minutes,” Jupe said. “The two of us can’t.”

“Too bad, Jupe, you only beat me in the breast stroke.” Pete took a deep breath and dived.

Jupiter and Bob followed. They saw Pete swim towards the black hole, look carefully inside and then disappear into it. It was at that very moment that the current seemed to get stronger. Slowly, the boat tilted to the side.

Bob was the first to see the danger—if the boat tilted completely, Pete would be trapped inside the boat! Excitedly, he gave Jupiter a sign and with strong strokes they swam to the side edge of the boat. With all their strength, they braced themselves against it to keep Pete’s escape route open. Their feet sank into the sandy sea bed, but they managed to stop the tilting of the boat. However, they were not able to hold onto their breaths very soon. Where was Pete? Why didn’t he come out?

After a while, Bob and Jupiter could not support the boat. The urge to swim upwards became stronger and stronger. Bob had just swam up. But Jupiter suddenly felt that something was behind him—a movement, a shadow, a gust of water. Was it a shark?

Jupiter turned around. The blood in his veins froze. A diver hovered directly in front of him with a harpoon aimed right at the First Investigator!

9. The Plastic Boat Destruction

Before Jupiter could do anything, the diver was next to him. Jupiter absolutely had to catch his breath. He almost blacked out. Only his strong will helped him to stay under water for a moment. Also, he could not leave Pete alone.

With his last bit of strength, Jupiter tried to grab the diver, but the man passed him effortlessly. With one sweeping movement, the stranger clamped his harpoon between the boat's railing and the sea bed, so that the boat could not tip any further. That was Pete's salvation and at that very moment, he slipped out of the hole and shot up as fast as an arrow. Jupiter followed him.

With their heads above the water, Jupe and Pete clung on to their plastic boat, breathing heavily. Pete had shock written all over his face.

"Never again," was the only thing he gasped.

A few seconds later, the stranger appeared. He pulled out his mouthpiece, spat water and pushed up his diving goggles. The Three Investigators almost slipped off the boat in surprise—it was Dick Perry himself!

"I should have let you toads drown," he rumbled. "First you interfere with my case, and now I have to save one of your lives!"

This quickly brought The Three Investigators back to reality. "We're just diving here," stuttered Pete.

"Purely by chance," Bob added.

"Well, we wanted to have a look at the place Miss Baker had described," said Jupiter, who obviously thought that after his action, Dick Perry didn't deserve a flat lie.

Perry didn't really care. "Next time I won't bail you out again! On the contrary, I'll put every conceivable obstacle so that you won't get in my way anymore! You're meddling in my cases! My experience is needed, and my fee is at stake!"

There was no other way. Jupiter had to make Dick Perry aware of a fact that he apparently did not yet know. "Tom's mother also gave us an assignment. We're working for Mrs Wood."

Dick Perry ran red. "Really? Did you lure her in with your freebie? Boys, this means war! I'm not kidding!" He put on his goggles, pushed in the mouthpiece of his oxygen tank and dived.

The Three Investigators looked at each other in surprise and just as they were about to snort loudly about Perry's performance, they were terrified.

Perry had gone back down to retrieve his harpoon. But what he did next was despicable. He came back up and punctured Pete's plastic boat! Within seconds, the small boat was hanging in the water like a plastic bag from a supermarket. Only the second air chamber just kept it on the surface.

Bob muttered something about 'bull's-eye'.

Pete expressed more clearly: "That slime ball!" he scolded and dived. Kelly had given him the boat as a gift so that they could paddle together to lonely bays. He would have liked to send a threatening gesture to the fat detective, but there was already no sign of Dick Perry.

Pete came to the surface again and swam back to his friends. "The guy saved my life after all when I was trapped in that wrecked boat," he confessed. "But he need not have acted in that way."

"Still, it annoys me to have to swim back without a boat," grumbled Jupiter.

"It's a good exercise for the swimming championship," Pete cheekily replied and started crawling. When they were a bit away from the rock, it also became clear where Dick Perry had surfaced from. In front of the reef, there was a motorboat rocking on the waves. The boat was named 'Barbara' and had its home port at Marina del Rey near Santa Monica.

The First Investigator again targeted the small bay on the coast and turned his mind to another problem. How could he stop Pete from giving up the case? After all, he knew his friend well enough to know that Perry's harpoon shot had made a big impression on him. And the First Investigator had not been wrong.

No sooner had they unlocked the door to their headquarters than Pete began to feel restless. Slightly exhausted from the bike ride, Jupiter let himself fall into his armchair. To save time, he cut Pete off before he started ranting.

"Listen, Pete. Maybe we should actually calm Perry down a little. We'll let Miss Baker's case go and concentrate on Tom. It's more important anyway. We're not gonna let Tom down."

Bob agreed, although he assumed the two cases were related anyway. Pete found the proposal acceptable. Maybe this way they could keep Perry off their backs a little.

"Did you find anything interesting inside the boat?" Jupiter asked. In all the excitement, he had completely lost sight of the real intention of the action.

"No jellyfish. Inside, everything was empty. The boat doesn't appear to have transported anything, or they have been taken out. Only one longish box was lying in one corner. I was going to swim there first, but then that stupid boat tilted to the side and I went back to the opening."

Bob was disappointed. "So, nothing that's going to help."

"Of course we could go down again with oxygen tanks," Jupiter thought, but Pete immediately lodged a protest.

"No way, fellas! Have you forgotten our agreement so soon?" Shaking his head, he sat down grumpily on the chair.

Bob then sat at the computer and turned it on. "Let's see what the e-mail Hookup has brought." Just a few moments later, he proudly announced: "There are several replies!"

Curious, he clicked on the e-mails. "A certain Max wrote that the pattern could be a leaf from a tree. Well, we had already thought of that. The next one, Paul, also thought about the pattern and said it was a maze—not a bad idea. The next guy went for a leaf again. Oh, man, no one knows anything about this photo..."

"Wait, here's one that sounds interesting. We've got a Steve Martin replying:"

Hello, friends.

I know most of your adventures already. You really are the best! Say, couldn't this pattern fit onto a section of a map? I don't know the man in the photo.

*Bye,
Steve Martin*

Bob looked up. "Fellas, earlier we had a reply saying that it was a treasure map. This latest one goes in a similar direction."

"Let's see what's next... Here an organization for the protection of seagrass writing to us. Strange... Their message makes no sense at all. There's always some jerks around."

"Ah, next... Mary-Kathy's note is the first one that refers to the photo. Listen:"

Dear Three Investigators,

I know the man in the photo. He lives in our neighbourhood. I see him sometimes when I play outside. He often yells at me. His name is Jack Sculley. I hope this helps you.

Mary-Kathy

Bob looked up. "Mary-Kathy, you sweetheart, I could kiss you!" He quickly wrote the name down. "That sounds really promising! Maybe this Jack Sculley will lead us to Tom. The only problem is that Mary-Kathy did not tell us where she lives. Anyway, I'll send her a thank-you reply and ask her. But meanwhile, we shouldn't wait for her reply. We can check the phone book."

Pete had already grabbed the phone book and was looking for the address of Jack Sculley.

"Meanwhile, look through the remaining e-mails quickly," Jupiter said. But there were nothing relevant.

By that time, Pete had already found Sculley's address. "Here it is: 21 Sunset Road, Santa Monica."

"Let's go, fellas," Bob urged.

"Right now? And how should we explain our visit to him?" Pete asked sceptically. He hated rash actions. Strangely enough, he usually found himself in the middle of one.

Jupiter calmed him down. "We'll think of something on the way," he suggested. "Maybe we'll even hold the photo under his nose, depending on how things go."

The First Investigator folded the printed photo of Mr Sculley and put it in the back pocket of his trousers. In a hurry, they left Headquarters.

As The Three Investigators were leaving the salvage yard on their bicycles, they noticed a mouse-grey Ford parked at the side of the road. Suddenly they heard the engine starting.

"Hey! That's Dick Perry!" Pete exclaimed in horror and stopped. "He's serious!"

Bob and Jupiter rode up to the Second Investigator.

"I don't think Perry believes we will keep our hands off the case," Jupiter suspected angrily. "This is strange because he should be spending time on his investigations. Instead, he wants to know what we're up to."

"And he probably suspects that we are better than what he would like to tell people," Pete said.

Jupiter smiled. "I have a plan to get rid of him.... What do you say, fellas?"

Pete and Bob nodded emphatically.

Jupiter pedalled and turned into a side street. Pete and Bob followed and listened to the First Investigator. Jupiter's idea of how they could lose Dick Perry was good, but it had a catch. They continued to discuss as they rode around the block again. When even that was not enough, they cycled along the rather long Whitfield Road. Then finally they agreed on what to do.

The Three Investigators looked around carefully. Dick Perry was still following them, albeit at a reasonable distance. Slowly he got into trouble with the drivers behind him, who didn't quite understand why he was driving so slowly. Perry should be lulled into certainty that The Three Investigators did not suspect anything of his presence. Therefore the three friends stayed together on the main street.

When they reached the city centre, they threw one last conspiratorial glance at each other. Then they separated. It happened very quickly. Bob and Pete continued straight ahead, while Jupiter abruptly turned right and immediately increased the speed.

Dick Perry had to decide whom to follow.

10. Tricked!

Dick Perry's car briefly started to roll, then it also turned right. The detective from Santa Monica had decided to follow Jupiter! Bob and Pete had predicted this from the start. Dick Perry knew Jupiter Jones was the leader of The Three Investigators. If there was one person to watch, it had to be him. So of all people, the First Investigator had to bite the bullet and forego a visit to Jack Sculley.

But at least he wanted to have some fun. Jupiter turned around and started pedalling hard. Perry stayed on his heels. He couldn't be shaken off, of course, and he could easily keep up with the pace. But Jupiter wanted to stall Perry a little longer.

After five minutes, Jupiter finally ran out of breath and he let the bike coast. Luckily he reached the city park of Rocky Beach. Now Perry had to get out of his car. Too bad that bicycles had to be pushed here, otherwise he would have led Dick Perry on a sweaty jogging session. Anyway, Juve came up with a better plan in lieu of leading Perry on a wild goose chase.

Jupiter pushed his bike into the park. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that Perry had parked his car in a no parking zone and followed him on foot. Perry did this very skilfully, always just within sight and mostly hidden by other people.

Jupiter walked a few more metres, and then sat down on a park bench. He looked at his watch and turned around discreetly. Perry had sat down a few benches away, next to an elderly bum who was sucking on a bottle wrapped in paper.

Jupiter took his time for his observations. In a good mood, he watched the passers-by who strolled past him. A few seagulls had also appeared, probably in search of leftover food. Jupiter remembered that he had with him his lunch, which he hadn't been able to eat at school. He pulled his lunch package out of his pocket, bit vigorously on a sandwich a few times and fed the rest to the birds.

To keep Perry happy, he looked at his watch conspicuously often and kept slipping restlessly back and forth on the bench as if he was expecting someone.

Suddenly Juve discovered among the passers-by was Mr Barnes, his English teacher. It was not planned, but Juve was at the right place at the right time. A little conversation would really set Perry's nerves on edge. Also Perry was a distance back so he shouldn't be able to hear that Jupiter was only talking to his teacher about trivialities.

Barnes saw Jupiter and approached him. "Fancy meeting you here, Jupiter."

Jupiter stood up. "Yes, I come to the park now and then to think, Mr Barnes. Have you marked the papers yet?"

"Just a quick glance. Not bad, your paper, I can tell you that much. A somewhat abrupt conclusion... if only you wouldn't always express yourself so awkwardly..." The teacher laughed for a moment and then turned to leave.

"Thank you, Mr Barnes. Have a nice day."

Mr Barnes greeted him back and walked on. Jupiter sat down again. With a few side glances, he realized that Dick Perry hadn't put his binoculars down at all. He probably thought Barnes was a secret informant and was now unsure whether he should follow him. But Perry stayed where he was.

Actually, Jupiter could now cycle back to Headquarters in comfort. Dick Perry would not be able to find Pete and Bob. They were supposed to pay Jack Sculley a visit undisturbed. But then Jupiter had another crazy idea. He pulled a piece of paper and pencil out of his pocket, turned around several times as if he were checking to see if he was being watched, then wrote the following message:

SECRET MESSAGE

For the Second Best Detective of All Detectives.

Dear Mr Perry,

Actually, I was going to suggest that you reimburse us for the plastic boat that you destroyed. But since we fooled you so nicely, I think we're even. You owe us nothing more.

Since I'm writing, we'll forego the Baker case for your sake. But we will continue to handle Tom Wood's case. After all, we have the assignment from his mother.

By the way, if you really manage to solve the case before we do, we will write a new slogan for your detective agency. For now, may I offer you this version: 'The Three Investigators make their mark, while Dick Perry gropes in the dark!'

Good luck,

Jupiter Jones,

The Three Investigators

There! Jupiter was in an almost exuberant state. "I can be so mean," he thought to himself and grinned.

Jupiter stood up and looked around here and there—just to exaggerate a bit. Then he rolled the piece of paper and placed it in a narrow fork of a park tree. After one more scrutinizing look, he grabbed his bike and quickly left.

Hidden behind a bush, Jupiter watched through his binoculars as Dick Perry rushed up with hurried steps and, stretching mightily, took possession of the paper.

In a moment he had unfolded it. The expression on Dick Perry's face was compensation enough for the destroyed plastic boat and also for the fact that Jupiter had, with a heavy heart, forewent visiting Jack Sculley.

Pete and Bob had experienced a much less amusing meeting. First of all, it took them a while to get to that area of Santa Monica by bicycle.

Then they finally found the house they were looking for—a large, noble villa in a prestigious area. But the property was secured by an iron gate and a high wall. Pete discovered a bell and pressed it several times but there was no response. The two detectives were about to leave, when the heavy gate was opened as if by itself. The boys swung themselves onto their bicycles and rode the almost fifty metres to the house. When they put the bikes down, the door opened.

"Yeah?" A man in a bathrobe stood in front of them. Water was dripping from his hair. Apparently he had just emerged from his swimming pool. It was the man in the photograph!

Bob started stuttering: "We... we..."

"You answer my newspaper ad, huh? Didn't you read it right? I'm looking for a female domestic helper, not male! Men just can't clean."

"But we—"

"I don't care who you have recommendations from. I don't care if it was the biggest Hollywood director himself. I'm not taking boys! I was fooled by people like you before. My house looked like a mess after that. Streaks on the windows. Water spots on the floor. Disorder in my study. No, thanks. Sorry, boys."

"So you really should hire a woman," Pete replied when he finally got a word in. "You've obviously had better experiences."

But that had apparently been the wrong approach.

"You can't say it like that," the man said. "I can't simply get good domestic help these days! The last housekeeper left me in a bad way! Me, of all people! I really have other worries at the moment. And she did everything so neatly! Quickly, properly—that went on for exactly three weeks, then she said she was overworked and had another job on the side. She said they pay better at Waterworld. Can you imagine that? She prefers to work at that run-down tourist trap to my great hut here. Anyway, I wouldn't want to pay her more. She has to be out of her mind."

At the mention of 'Waterworld', Pete and Bob involuntarily flinched.

"Mr Sculley," Bob said cautiously, "was your last housekeeper Betty Sutton?"

The mere mention of the name provoked a real tantrum in Mr Sculley. "You know that disloyal tomato? Did she send you to me?" He grabbed his head. "So this is it. She doesn't want to work for me! Is it that she wants you to collect her outstanding wages? As if two boys like you would make an impression on me! Oh, no, she has messed up big time. You go tell your friend that she can forget about her wages!"

"What do you pay per hour?" Bob asked.

"I pay enough, nobody can complain about that! Not even Betty Sutton! Get out of here! Or I'll get my gun and make you move!" He slammed the door.

Bob was already turning to leave when Pete held him back. They still had another job to do. Unsteadily, the Second Investigator slipped his hand into his back pocket. But he couldn't find the photo of Mr Sculley. The other pocket was empty as well.

"Did you have it?" he whispered to Bob.

"The photo?" Bob stuttered. "Probably it's with Jupe. There's no point in pointing it out to that obnoxious Sculley anyway. No wonder all the housekeepers run away from him. Probably he spent a little too much time in the army."

"I wouldn't like to dust books for him either... if he even has books."

"But that's no excuse for Betty Sutton," Bob went on. "If I hadn't known any better, I would have thought that they should get along really well with each other."

Bob got on his bike and waited for Pete, who, as usual, had double locked his expensive racing bike.

"Overall, the operation was a mega-bust," Bob noted soberly. "We couldn't figure out what Sculley was up to... let alone find any trace of Tom."

"That's true..." Pete replied and unlocked the second chain lock. "But the fact that this Betty Sutton worked at Sculley's is probably more than a coincidence!"

Bob nodded. "This does indeed give us some food for thought. With this news, we can certainly compensate Jupe for not finding out anything about the photo. Hurry up, or that despicable guy in the bathrobe comes out again."

But they came scot-free from Jack Sculley's property and were glad to be back on the street.

On the return journey, Pete had a hard time calming down. "I hate guys like Sculley—a disgusting know-it-all... Imagine all that mindless rubbish he uttered."

Bob was also in a bad mood, but as they cycled back towards Rocky Beach, a smile suddenly came over his face. "I can think of something else, Pete. You may not like it, but you'll find it interesting." With two hard pedal strokes, he had caught up with Pete.

Pete turned his head to the side. "What's that?"

"Kelly," Bob said. "She is a woman."

"Of course I know that," Pete replied.

"She can apply to Sculley," Bob continued, "as a housekeeper."

"You can't be serious!" exclaimed Pete in horror. He almost hit a parked car. "Kelly with that bully? She will never do that. She has too much of a mind of her own!"

"Well, Pete, come up with something to convince your girlfriend," grinned Bob.

When Pete and Bob came back to Headquarters, Jupiter was already waiting impatiently for them. In his usual concise manner, Bob summarized what they had experienced. When he was talking about Betty Sutton, Jupiter interrupted him for the first time.

"Betty Sutton worked for Sculley as a housekeeper?" Jupe remarked in surprise. "Here's another clue that the two cases are related. It's imperative that we find out exactly what Betty is up to."

Pete put on a sceptical face. "Why did she work for Sculley? He's a real creep. The few dollars she made won't even compensate for how that creep treats people! There's gotta be something else behind this."

"The best thing to do is to monitor them," Bob suggested. "Maybe this trail will lead us to Tom."

"Sculley must have something to do with Tom's disappearance!" Jupe remarked. "After all, it's his photo that Tom sent us."

"I have an idea!" Bob told Jupe about asking Kelly to apply for a job at Sculley's house.

Jupiter was immediately thrilled. "If Kelly works at Sculley's house, then she can let us in there secretly and we can have a thorough look around. I just hope that another applicant doesn't get in the way of us getting Kelly to take the job."

"That's the least of my worries," Pete said. "With Sculley's attitude and obnoxious behaviour, he'll immediately puts all possible candidates to flight."

Jupiter looked at Pete doubtfully. "Nevertheless, tell Kelly to hurry. Pete, you tell her and prepare her well for this man so she doesn't throw a sharp answer and ruin the whole plan."

"You mean she should shut her ears and say 'yes' like a good girl?" Pete frowned. "Wouldn't it be better for Bob to ask Elizabeth?"

Bob wanted to answer indignantly, but Jupiter intervened.

"Elizabeth's nerves are nowhere near as strong. Kelly takes it easy and can manage very different things." That's right. For The Three Investigators, Kelly had been involved in their investigations several times before.

"All right," Pete surrendered sullenly. He didn't like asking Kelly for anything, especially when it concerned The Three Investigators. She had often complained that Pete had more time for cases than for her. But in the last few weeks, she had developed a more relaxed relationship with the detectives. Since she had been meeting regularly with a few friends from a beach volleyball group, it was Pete who now reacted jealously to her appointments.

To lighten things up, Jupiter told his friends his encounter with Dick Perry in the city park. Especially since everyone was still very much annoyed with the destruction of Pete's plastic boat, Jupiter's report was a source of amusement.

“Pride comes before a fall,” Bob commented.

And Pete summed it up: “Revenge is as sweet as sugar.”

Jupiter smiled. “While you’re on the subject of proverbs, ‘he who laughs last laughs best’.” He ended the round of discussion happily.

11. Another Virus Attack

It took until the next noon before the detective work could be continued. Tom's seat in the classroom had remained empty and The Three Investigators had been restlessly sliding back and forth in their chairs during the lesson. They wondered what had Dick Perry done in the meantime? Had he got close to Mr Sculley and Betty Sutton yet? Since Jupe's encounter with him in the park, Perry had not been seen or heard.

When Jupiter unlocked the door to Headquarters, he had the feeling that he had said too much in his letter to Perry. Now Dick Perry would do anything to show The Three Investigators that he was the better detective. What he was capable of had been sufficiently proven by his harpoon shot. It's hard to imagine if Dick Perry finally had the last laugh.

When Jupiter put his school bag on the desk, the phone rang. It was Tom's mother. She sounded excited.

"What's new?" Jupiter wanted to know.

"Tom sent me a message by e-mail," Mrs Wood reported hastily. "He told me not to worry. He'd be home the day after tomorrow. I hope it's true!"

"Could you read the message to me?" Jupiter asked.

"Dear Mum. I know you're worried. But I have something important to do. No fear. It's nothing dangerous. I'll be back the day after tomorrow. So don't get upset... Tom."

Jupiter pinched his lower lip, and asked: "Do you believe that Tom wrote that message himself?"

"Excuse me?"

"Would Tom have written an e-mail like this?"

"You mean, is this message real? ... I don't know. It could be, although I wonder about Tom's behaviour. Anyway, the police are pretty relaxed about it now. If he really had been kidnapped, there would have been some contact from the kidnappers. That Inspector Cotta, who showed up this morning, has also reassured me. Do you have a concern about this?"

Jupiter hesitated a moment. "There's probably nothing wrong," he reassured Mrs Wood. "One more question. What was the sender's name on the mail? His own?"

"Hold on, I'll check..." Mrs Wood said. "Yes, it is from his e-mail address."

"Hmm..." Jupe thought aloud. "That's not conclusive either..."

Anyway, Jupiter thanked her for the information and hung up. He could not ascertain the authenticity of the e-mail.

Something else troubled Jupiter—Dick Perry. If the detective really wanted to get ahead of The Three Investigators, the most obvious thing for him was to plant listening devices in their headquarters. That way he could find out what further steps The Three Investigators were planning.

Jupiter quickly checked whether they had received any unannounced visits overnight. But all security systems were intact. His enquiry to Aunt Mathilda was also inconclusive—she hadn't noticed anything unusual.

While Jupiter unscrewed the phone to look for mini-microphones, Bob came in. It was immediately clear to him what Jupiter was doing. "Did that louse Dick Perry install bugging devices?"

Jupiter shook his head. "Found nothing. Has Pete contacted you?"

"No."

The Second Investigator was in his newly serviced MG driving Kelly to Santa Monica to meet Mr Sculley. How he got his girlfriend to cooperate had remained his secret. Anyway, he had arrived at school in the morning in a good mood and left right after school.

After Jupiter told Bob of Mrs Wood's call, he went to the computer and turned it on. Maybe there were more responses from the e-mail Hookup.

While Jupe was waiting for the computer to boot up, his thoughts wandered to Betty Sutton. What was she doing with Miss Baker? How did she know Sculley? Was she behind the jellyfish e-mail? Maybe she set up that jellyfish incident at the boat wreck too. No doubt she knew a lot about these creatures. Above all, had Betty Sutton kidnapped Tom because he was on her trail? Or was it Mr Sculley who was on the photo that Tom had downloaded?

Anyway, Jupe logged onto their e-mail account. Suddenly, he sat up straight. "Hey, Bob!" he said. "Look at this—we've also got an e-mail from Tom!"

Bob quickly went over to Jupe to take a look. "Is it really from him?"

"Let's check this out," Jupe said as he clicked on the e-mail. "Hmm... It is from his e-mail address, just like the one his mum received. Here's what he says:"

Hi Jupe,

I'm onto something big, but I am alright, not to worry. Can't tell you about it now, but I have another image file for you. I think it will help you in your investigations.

Tom

"Let's see what this image file is all about," Jupe said as he clicked on the attachment to download it.

The computer was taking a very long time today, it flashed through his head for a moment, but he didn't ask himself why. While waiting, Bob went to pull out a new beverage crate from under the shelf in the back of the trailer.

Suddenly Jupe stared at the screen. Strange things were happening there. A strange sound came out of Jupiter's mouth.

Bob turned around in shock. "What's got into you?" he asked. "Seems like you've seen a ghost!"

"I would've rather seen a ghost," Jupiter cried. "Look at this!"

Bob let go of the crate and jumped to Jupiter. The screen showed jellyfish moving slowly from one edge to the other. Suddenly a dark rectangle appeared that looked like a chocolate bar. One after another, three jellyfish started to chew on the rectangle. Little by little, they were chewing faster and faster.

Bob couldn't take his eyes off of it. "What are they doing?" he asked in horror.

Jupiter was at a loss. In the meantime, the jellyfish had already eaten half of the rectangle chocolate bar. Then it finally dawned on him. "The hard disk!" he yelled. "They're destroying our computer's hard disk! All our data is in danger!"

Helplessly he pressed a few keys—but without any visible success. The chocolate bar disappeared piece by piece.

Bob couldn't take it anymore. Determined, he crawled under the desk. "I'm pulling the plug," he shouted energetically. "Right? What do you think?"

"It doesn't matter now!" replied Jupiter. "It's too late! I think everything's gone—total loss. The screen is black."

Disillusioned, Bob crawled out from under the table. “And what does that mean, Jupe? Do you think my whole archive is wiped out?” Bob asked. Pure horror was written on his face. Years of work had been ruined within minutes.

“Yes! The jellyfish sender has sent us a computer virus. Everything on our hard disk is gone!”

“Our case reports, photographs, fingerprint scans, encryption software, the... phone records, my space game...” Bob tried to recall.

“Yeah, that too,” Jupe said. “And so is my chess game... Everything that we didn’t back up is gone. This virus is different from that on Miss Baker’s computer. Hers is only a display, this, however, is a malicious one. I believe our hard disk is wiped out completely.”

In that first moment of terror, Bob hadn’t even thought about it. The entire archive was copied onto an external hard disk drive. They had the original CDs of most games or at least knew how to get them back. Still, it was a huge effort to reinstall everything.

Jupiter quickly went over in his head what kind of data that they might not have backed up. He turned pale. “The e-mails from Hookup are gone, including the two image files from Tom. I didn’t think of backing it up earlier.”

Bob stared again at the black screen. He still couldn’t believe it. “How did this virus get on our computer?”

“I’m really an idiot. I got fooled big time,” Jupe confessed. “Remember that Tom’s hard disk was taken out of his computer? The kidnapper has all of Tom’s files and perhaps his e-mails as well. He knew that Tom sent us the earlier e-mail and now he sent us a fake e-mail with the virus in it! I activated the virus by clicking on the attachment. That launched the virus program! The jellyfish virus wiped out the two image files.”

“In any case, we still have the printout of the two image files,” Bob added. “However, all the Hookup e-mails are gone.”

Jupiter nodded peevishly. “This is to be feared. The perpetrator is going all out to stop us.” That drove Jupiter’s blood into his veins. “I could bite my lower lip for so much stupidity.”

“And what about Miss Baker? ... The woman who started it all?” Bob suddenly asked.

“Why Miss Baker?”

“Perhaps Miss Baker isn’t as inexperienced as she pretends to be and she herself behind all this action.”

“Weird,” Jupe remarked.

The phone interrupted their deliberations. Jupe turned on the loudspeaker and answered the call.

It was Kelly. “Hi Jupe! You can come now! To Jack Sculley, I mean.”

“Kelly!” cried Jupiter in amazement. “Are you with him yet?”

“Yes, and I can’t talk out loud. Sculley gave me the job right away. Oh, man, that guy is terrible! Now he’s sitting out by the pool. He’s always coming up with new things he doesn’t like in this world. I can’t even get to work as I have to listen to all that complaining. If it wasn’t for you guys—”

“How can we get in the house?” Jupiter interrupted her.

“Just wait outside the electric gate. I’ll open it a gap when I see you. At the back of the house, there is a window open. But for goodness’ sake be quiet! And don’t touch the slightest thing! If Sculley finds out, he’ll cut my head off... And hurry up, so I don’t have to run in here again. Pete left to get you guys. He should be with you any minute.”

“Kelly—”

“I’ve got to go. Sculley’s calling me again!” She hung up.

“Did you get all that?” Jupe asked Bob.

He nodded. “That’s great. The sooner the better. Let me just get our gear together.”

They did not have to wait long. Just as Jupiter closed the door behind him, Pete drove into the salvage yard with squealing tyres. His MG was in good shape again.

Uncle Titus came running out of the yard office furiously. “I told you not to barge in here like this, Pete.”

Pete got out and slammed the driver’s door. “Emergency, Mr Jones!”

“An emergency, yes, yes. You even have emergencies when you are on your bikes,” Titus cried and pointed to Jupiter’s and Bob’s bikes leaning against the wooden fence. The tyres were flat, and they could even see that from a distance.

The Three Investigators ran there and inspected the damage. There was a nail in each of the tyres. Then they discovered a note stuck between two bicycle spokes. Jupiter read out:

Hello you Three Investigators,

Thank you for the friendly lesson yesterday in the park. Here’s a little something back.

Dick Perry—who will be ahead in the end!

PS: Do you know my latest slogan? ‘Dick Perry puts out fires, while The Three Investigators are patching tyres!’

“That rascal!” exclaimed Bob.

“I don’t think we’ll get him that easily,” Jupiter had to say in a contrite way. His guilty conscience plagued him. He had probably gone a little too far with his note to Perry.

Jupe turned around to Uncle Titus, who was still standing in front of the yard office, watching them.

“Uncle Titus?”

“Yeah?”

“Could you please, for once, kindly, just this once... patch up the tyres?”

“You can do it yourself,” Titus Jones called back in indignation. “I don’t have time for this.”

“Uncle, please. We have an urgent appointment,” Jupiter cried and waved his friends hurriedly to Pete’s car.

12. Face to Face

In Pete's MG, they were in Santa Monica much faster than the day before with the bikes. During the ride, Jupiter and Bob kept looking through the rear window to see if Dick Perry was following them but the coast was clear.

The Three Investigators found out why when they turned into the street where Jack Sculley's house was, Dick Perry's mouse-grey Ford was already parked diagonally opposite the entrance.

"Duck," cried Pete just in time. Bob and Jupiter lowered their heads and Pete managed to fold the sun protection in front of the windscreen at the last second. Hopefully Dick Perry had not seen them.

Now they could not possibly park in front of Sculley's house and hang around in front of his gate until Kelly opened it. Pete drove on and only stopped when he had turned into the next corner.

"A punch in the gut," Bob commented on the presence of Perry. "So Dick Perry is on the trail of Jack Sculley as well. Our whole lead is gone."

"I hadn't expected this either," Jupiter had to admit. "He's better than we thought."

"But Perry is waiting outside the gate and we'll be inside soon," Pete tried to lift the spirits a little.

Jupiter laughed bitterly. "Our original plan might have been all right. But we can't just march past Perry, pat him on the back, wish him good luck and then head into Jack Sculley's house. If he wants to get one over on us, he calls Sculley and tells him that he has unwanted visitors. And then we have to start thinking about how to get out of there."

"Perhaps we could ask Kelly to look around by herself," Bob suggested.

"No way!" Pete replied briefly.

Bob then remembered that they could not contact Kelly anyway. "Postpone the action?" he asked cautiously.

"Out of the question," Jupiter decided. "We'll go over the wall somewhere. Hopefully, Kelly will have opened the window by now."

"If I drive around the corner once more," Pete pondered, "we'll come to the small side lane bordering Sculley's property. The wall is pretty high, though." But the more he occupied himself with the thought, the more doubts came to him. "But it would be rash to climb over the wall. It's a clear break-in! And above all, we didn't discuss it with Kelly. Something could go wrong."

"Nevertheless, we will do it," Jupiter said. "It's about Tom. Drive on!"

Reluctantly, Pete started the car and drove along the two roads until they came to the narrow lane that led along the side of Sculley's house. There was a narrow grass verge between the lane and the brick wall.

"It should be here," Pete said. "But the wall is higher than I thought."

"About two metres fifty," Jupiter estimated and looked around. "Fortunately, there's no one around."

"The people across the street might see us," Pete objected.

"They certainly don't stare out the window all day," Jupiter countered.

“What if Perry comes around the corner?” Pete continued.

“A certain risk must be taken,” Jupe said. “Park right here!”

“I can’t park here!” Pete objected. “The grass verge is too narrow. In fact, the lane is also narrow.”

“Come on, Pete! We don’t have time to lose,” Jupe urged. “Park your MG here closer to the wall. It’s just for a while.”

Pete did as he was told. The car was now parked so close to the wall that Bob and Jupiter had to get out on the driver’s side.

As inconspicuously as possible, the three boys took a few glances at the surroundings. No one was to be seen, not even at the windows of the houses on the opposite.

“And now what?” Pete asked. “How are we gonna get in from here?”

“Too bad your MG is so low,” Jupiter said. “But it might just be enough.”

“For what?” Pete looked at him. “You don’t wanna—” He turned pale.

“So that’s why you asked me to park here! No, you can’t. My precious car! Jupe, this is a lover’s car! Put that out of your mind right now!”

Jupiter ignored the Second Investigator, stepped behind the car and carefully started climbing up the boot.

“My car will never stand this,” Pete whimpered. “Jupe, you can’t climb on it, you’re much too heavy!”

“We’ll see,” Jupiter said and put one knee on the roof. They could hear a slight ‘pop’. The sound went through Pete’s bones.

Jupiter pulled himself onto the roof of the MG and felt his way up the wall. Soon he was at the height of the upper edge. He glanced over briefly and swung to the other side a little leisurely. A muffled noise announced his landing.

“Well,” Bob said, stepping from one foot to the other. “No offence, Pete, but... but Jupiter is already over there... I’m a lot lighter... and after all, this is Tom we’re talking about...” He nodded encouragingly at Pete, climbed onto the car with much more agility than Jupiter and quickly pulled himself over the wall.

Desperately Pete stroked over the roof of his four-wheeled piece of jewellery. What should he do? He looked up and down the street, looked over to the house, assessed the wall, then followed Jupiter and Bob. They were waiting behind a bush.

“There you are at last,” hissed Jupiter. “We have been lucky. Look! There’s the open window at the back of the house! Over there at the garden, you can see the swimming pool. If Sculley is there, he should not be able to see us entering.”

In a stooped position, he started to run up the hill. Bob ran close behind him and Pete had no choice but to follow them.

Climbing through the window was no problem. Seconds later, The Three Investigators were inside the house. They looked around and a smile flashed across their faces—Kelly had put them on the right track. They were standing in the dining room, but an open door showed them that the study was just outside.

“Get to work, fellas.” Jupiter sneaked ahead.

Sculley must have had a penchant for antiques. Dark, heavy furniture dominated the room. On one wall hung an oversized painting depicting a stormy sea, whose kitsch was only surpassed by the lush golden picture frame.

But now was not the time to think about taste. Jupiter wanted to get an overview first. Carefully he stepped up to the glass outer door, which was framed on both sides by two floor-length, heavy curtains.

The door led out to the street and was locked. As the house was slightly elevated, Jupiter could see Dick Perry's mouse-grey Ford over the wall. Perry sat behind the wheel and stared at the entrance gate. Contentedly, Jupiter smiled to himself. Now The Three Investigators had the advantage over him again, even though they had not found anything yet.

Jupiter went back into the study. Bob and Pete had already started searching for clues.

Jack Sculley had arranged his desk so that he could look outside while he worked. The desk was a mess—letters, slips of paper, books. There was also a shelf stuffed full of files and a massive cupboard in the room. To the right of the desk, Sculley had set up his computer on a side table. It was the computer, above all, that aroused Jupiter's interest, even though it would not be easy to get information without knowing the password.

"I'll take a look at the computer," Jupe announced.

"What if Jack Sculley surprises us?" whispered Pete. "It's hard to hide in here!"

"Bob and I will stand behind the curtains in case of emergency, and Pete... you crawl into the closet!"

"I want to get behind the curtains too!"

"There's only room for two of us."

"And why should I, of all people... oh, bummer." Pete opened the closet door. It creaked softly. Satisfied, he realized that he could find room among the cardboard boxes that were stacked inside, if necessary.

Outside, Mr Sculley was calling for Kelly. "Bring my drink down to the pool, will you?"

"Yes, right away," Kelly replied. Her footsteps could be heard.

"He'll splash around in the water for a while," Jupiter noted.

Systematically, they continued to search. Bob pushed aside an old paperweight—a big glass globe depicting the earth, then he and Pete picked up Sculley's notes page by page and skimmed over them.

"That's interesting," Pete muttered after a while and looked up.

"Jack Sculley owns five fishing boats. They are all moored at Marina del Rey. He rents them out for private tours."

Interested, Jupiter looked up from the computer. "Jack has boats? Maybe that's an angle. I'm still trying to figure out the password over here."

"How long do you think you'll need, master detective?" Pete teased him and smiled.

"I've tried everything I can think of," Jupe said. "Read me the names of the boats."

Pete held the paper up to his eyes again. "Yes, they're right here. Port permits for *Sea Star*, *Santa Monica III*, *Janine*, *Blue Sea*, *Cutty Shark*."

"*Cutty Shark*!" Bob yelled in between. "Isn't that the boat that sank recently?"

"Sure, that's the jellyfish boat that Miss Baker dived to!" Pete remarked.

"That has to be it!" Excited, Jupiter typed the name into the computer. But unfortunately it was not the password. Before Jupiter could try a different name, they heard steps.

"Footsteps!" hissed Pete. "Hide!"

It was too late to turn off the computer. Next door, someone entered the dining room. In one fell swoop, Pete disappeared into the cupboard and closed the door behind him. Jupiter and Bob hurried to get behind the curtains.

Unfortunately, they both chose the same side. They collided head-on. "Watch it, Bob!"

"Why me?"

It was too late to break up. Jupiter made himself as thin as possible and pulled Bob beside him. But it wasn't quite enough—from the side they were probably visible.

Someone entered the study. The Three Investigators held their breath. But suddenly the footsteps could hardly be heard. Jupiter shivered. Did Sculley suspect something?

It was difficult to determine exactly where the person was in the room. Now Jupiter heard a noise at the desk. Then something was typed into the computer. With an acoustic signal, the computer signalled that it accepted the password.

Jupiter's heart was in his mouth—it had to be Jack Sculley... and he sensed that something was wrong... A gentle breeze went through the room. Where was Sculley now? Something clicked. Jupiter closed his eyes and wished he could go back to Headquarters right away.

Then Jupiter heard someone breathing. Right on the other side of the curtain. Was he standing face-to-face with Sculley? Only the curtain fabric was in between.

Jupiter held his breath.

13. Red Alert!

There was only one solution—Jupiter and Bob had to pull the curtain to the side and surprise the unknown person. Jupiter squinted at Bob and nodded forward. Bob understood the strategy. The First Investigator angled his arms to swing to strike, and Bob grabbed a curtain fold. But at that moment, they were beaten to the punch.

Swoosh! The curtain was suddenly drawn open.

“Aha! The Three Investigators,” they heard a woman’s voice say.

“Kelly!” Jupiter startled. “Geez! You scared us!”

“Scared? I think you’re quite happy to see me here and not Mr Sculley,” she replied.

“Where’s Pete? I hope he’s not wandering around the house.”

Jupiter pointed to the cupboard whose door just opened. The Second Investigator climbed out from between the cardboard boxes in bewilderment.

But Kelly barely even looked at him. “Now tell me why you didn’t stick to my plan,” she said. “You’re always going off the deep end. I stared my eyes out of my head to look for you at the gate, and you’re already happily snooping around Mr Sculley’s study! I actually imagined our collaboration differently!”

“There is no such thing as happily snooping,” Pete said sheepishly. “Unfortunately, we had to change the plan and climb over the wall.”

Bob came to his aid. “Another detective is lurking outside the gate. He’s also working on the case.”

“Another detective?”

“Yes,” Pete took over. “A real sleazy type, devious, fat and...” He searched for words.

“Mean,” Bob helped out. “Totally mean!”

“And so... slimy!”

“He destroyed the plastic boat you gave Pete with his harpoon,” Jupiter added. “Hasn’t Pete told you yet?”

“No. He didn’t.”

“I haven’t had time,” Pete excused himself. He could have saved his apology, because if there was anything else needed to turn Kelly against Dick Perry, it was the incident about the harpoon shot.

Jupiter had already understood that. “He thinks we’re a bunch of losers and has taken the case from us. When you leave the house, he might talk to you, and then you’d better tell him —”

“—That you broke in here and all he has to do is to pick you up? Is that what you mean, Juve?” She smiled defiantly at him.

“Yes, well, no...” He laughed. “Sorry, you’re not stupid.”

“—Which, for once, you’re right about.” Kelly had calmed down. “Okay, you three investigators, I can handle your competition. Now, do your jobs. By the way, you don’t need to look for Tom. I already combed the house. Now, I’ve gotta get back out there before Sculley gets suspicious.”

Before she left, Jupiter held her back. “How did you know the password to the computer?”

“That irritated you, didn’t it? Earlier, Sculley typed my address into his file, so I looked over his shoulder. It is ‘Doggy’.”

So proud of Kelly, Pete regained his composure. Gratefully, he gave Kelly a peck on the cheek. “See you later, kitten, if we don’t run into each other here again.”

She smiled and turned. “Don’t give me any trouble.”

“Did he say ‘kitten’?” Bob asked Jupiter after she had left.

“I have also heard something like that,” Jupiter said and scratched his neck thoughtfully.

“Pussycat or scratchy cat?” teased Bob.

Threatening, Pete lifted the paperweight. “You’re about to get a scratch on your thinking machines,” he said and threatened Bob with the glass globe.

Immediately Jupiter put his finger to his lips as a warning. “Don’t always be so sensitive, Pete,” he hissed. They listened, but nothing happened. So Jupiter took care of the computer to which he now finally had the password.

“‘Doggy’,” he murmured. “It matches Sculley’s chubby face quite well.”

He didn’t have to search long. Among the saved mails, he found a message whose sender he knew only too well.

“Listen,” Jupiter whispered and bent closer to the screen. “Here’s a mail from Meg Baker a few days ago. I suspected it all along! It is very interesting what she wrote:”

Doggy, you must be in another mess! Since when do you personally go out in your old fishing boat at night and in the fog? You must have been drunk again to set that thing on the rocks. Even if the police didn’t find anything, I’ll take a look at it. You can count on it! I’ll get you sometime! And then you’ll finally go to prison.

Meg

“‘Doggy’!” Bob exclaimed. “That’s what Meg Baker called her ex-husband when we were with her. That’s means Sculley is her ex-husband! I recall that she seems to really hate him!”

Jupiter nodded. “That explains a lot. So that’s why Perry is outside the gate. Miss Baker told him about her suspicions after she assigned him the case.”

Pete ordered his thoughts. “Wait a minute! In the e-mail, Miss Baker said that she wants to look at the wreck. Sculley was up to something on his boat trip that night. He didn’t want his ex-wife to find out. Probably he organized the jellyfish thing so that he could stop her!”

“Then he must have been working with Betty Sutton,” Bob said. “Then why is he bitching about her like that?”

“They’re pretending,” Pete suggested. “They don’t want people to know that they are working together.”

While they were thinking, Jupiter looked for Sculley’s reply to Meg Baker but he found none. He still clicked on various folders and got bogged down in a whole series of documents that had nothing to do with the case. A bit disillusioned, he closed the documents.

“We can’t turn everything upside down here, but I think we’ve found enough.” As the computer was shutting down, the First Investigator summed up: “Sculley is Baker’s ex-husband. Betty Sutton worked for Sculley as a housekeeper and is, on the other hand, supposedly friends with Miss Baker. Sculley was steering the boat that went down. Miss Baker found it strange that Sculley was at the helm himself, and accused him of being out of line. She went to check and dived to the scene of the accident. The jellyfish stung her. It just so happened that Betty Sutton was there... And at Waterworld, a couple of jellyfish was supposedly stolen.

“It would be fitting that Sculley and Betty are working together, strange as it may sound. It’s just a pity that I didn’t find any conclusive proof on Sculley’s computer that he was behind the jellyfish e-mails... And finally, we still have no sign of Tom.”

“We should check on Betty,” Pete suggested. “She’s the one who seems to pull the strings.”

At that moment, Bob cleared his throat audibly. During the conversation, he had pulled open the drawer of the desk and rummaged through it. He carefully pulled out something. It was a shiny little bar.

“Gold,” Pete remarked. “And what a piece this is!”

Intrigued, he stepped up to Bob. Accidentally, he grazed the glass globe paperweight on the edge of the table with his arm. It landed on the floor with a loud crash. Glass shattered all over the floor.

“Pete!” cried Jupiter.

Bob dropped the gold bar into the drawer and quickly closed it. “Are you crazy?”

Pete stared in shock at the glass fragments, unable to do anything. His first impulse was to sweep the fragments away, but on second thought, Sculley would surely notice the missing paperweight.

“I... I...” he stuttered.

They heard someone walk up to the door and the three of them turned around. Thank goodness it was Kelly.

“What on earth have you done?” she whispered when she saw the damage. She was about to lose her temper. “Sculley just came into the house. He must have heard the crash! And he’ll be here in a few seconds!”

She looked around. “Hide, quick!”

Jupiter and Bob disappeared behind the curtains, while Kelly resolutely pushed Pete, who still looked petrified with shock, into the closet and shut the door behind him. The whole thing happened not a second too soon.

In a rage, Jack Sculley stormed into the study.

14. Kelly Gets Fired

Sculley's gaze focused on the parquet floor littered with broken glass.

"What have you done, Kelly? You stupid girl!" He bent down and picked up a large fragment of the glass globe. "That was a valuable piece of glass."

"It... it was unintentional," Kelly tried to calm him down. She had no choice but to undo what Pete had done.

"Sweep up the glass! You klutz! Is this the only kind of loser I get these days? Oh, Kelly, you are going to pay for this damage! And after you sweep this up, you can go. You're fired!"

While Kelly fetched broom and dustpan, Sculley trudged back and forth swearing in the room. The glass crunched under his slippers.

Behind the curtains, Jupiter and Bob hardly dared to take a breath. Hopefully Sculley didn't start investigating what else Kelly might have touched. He would quickly spot the uninvited guests.

Finally, Kelly came back and began to pick up the pieces. To distract Sculley from The Three Investigators, she talked incessantly. "I just wanted to wipe the table, Mr Sculley, I didn't mean to... This glass globe was so close to the edge of the desk..."

"My paperweight was in the middle of the table," Sculley rumbled. "What are you doing in my study, anyway?" Suddenly, his voice changed to a threatening tone. "You're supposed to clean the bedroom windows, Kelly," he said slowly. "I think you're snooping around here. Are you here to steal something?"

Jupiter and Bob could hear Sculley pull open the desk drawer, and a few moments later, he gave a sigh of relief. Then he discovered the mess on his desk. "My papers are in a different position..."

"I was done with the bedroom windows," Kelly quickly defended herself. "I'm in here to wipe the table, Mr Sculley. Believe me! I'm not one who lazily sits around after finishing my work! I'm really sorry about your paperweight. It was unintentional! You're welcome to search my bag."

"I'll do just that!" Sculley said.

Jupiter noticed that Kelly was slowly getting the situation under control. Still, he imagined with horror what would happen if Sculley discovered the three of them.

Then it got down to business. Kelly seemed to fear something similar.

"Okay, Mr Sculley," she said, pouring a shovelful of glass fragments into a bucket. "I've swept up everything now. So if you want to discharge me right now, well, I understand. Please accompany me to the door."

"Can't you see yourself out?"

"I suggest that you accompany me to the door," Kelly insisted in a firm voice, "or else you're going to insinuate that I pick up a few things along the way. Besides, my bag is outside. You wanted to take a look at it."

"All right." Sculley followed Kelly out of the study.

"Come on, now!" Jupiter hissed, getting out from behind the curtain.

Bob ran to the closet and pulled the door open. "Pete, get out!"

Pete got out. His legs were almost asleep and he stretched them out. He was also plagued by a guilty conscience. "That scumbag is from the last millennium! Poor Kelly. She took quite a beating! And all because of my stupidity!"

Jupiter didn't contradict him. "You can apologize to Kelly later," he just said. "There's plenty of long movie nights ahead, but now let's just get out of here!"

But they did not get far. No sooner were they at the door of the study than they heard Sculley coming back. To make matters worse, the phone started ringing at that very moment.

"Back!" Jupiter commanded. "But quickly!"

Just in time, The Three Investigators disappeared into their hiding places again.

Already Sculley hurried in and grabbed the phone. "Yes? Yes, speaking... Who is that? Is it you, Meg? What's with that disguised voice? ... You said you were gonna call later... Yeah, yeah, all right, I know you're in charge... Yes, the gold is here. I got it out today."

There was a long pause, during which the caller seemed to explain something. Jupiter and Bob stood behind the curtain and pricked up their ears.

"Yeah, I got it," Sculley said. "Okay, one hour. I'll be on time, yeah! ... By e-mail? ... Now?" Sculley turned on his computer. For a minute, all they could hear was the sound of the computer booting up.

"The e-mail's on," Sculley finally said. "Wait, let me look at it... Yeah, I know this place... Yes, I'm coming! ... But I need my stuff back! ... Yes, yes. I'll do whatever you want... Listen, you better not fool around with me!" Sculley slammed the phone down with a curse.

Jupiter and Bob could hear him printing something. He folded the paper and then pulled open the drawer of his desk. A few moments later, he left the study. He had left the computer running. Shortly afterwards, the front door slammed shut.

Suddenly The Three Investigators were alone in the house. Jupiter and Bob got out from behind the curtain again. Jupiter stepped out to the glass door and saw Perry's mouse-grey Ford drive away to take up Sculley's pursuit.

"Now Perry is on Sculley's trail," Jupiter noted, but he didn't like that at all.

The First Investigator sensed that he was nervous. This is when he became cold as ice and his thinking machine ran at full speed. With the strange call, something decisive had begun and Jupiter haven't piece everything together yet. The fact that Dick Perry was now close to solving the case was the last straw.

Jupiter turned around. Pete and Bob stood helplessly in the middle of the room, waiting for the First Investigator to think of something. They were running out of time.

"By the time we get to the car, Sculley will be long gone," Jupiter said. Then he remembered the computer. "He printed out something."

While Jupiter took a look at the computer, Bob looked in the drawer that confirm that Sculley had taken the gold bar.

Jupiter quickly found what he was looking for. "This last e-mail was sent from the beach café! Wait, I'll open the attachment..."

As soon as Jupe opened the attachment, the three of them stared at the screen. "This... this is indeed a surprise!" Jupe remarked.

There had appeared an image file all too familiar—it was the drawing that Tom had e-mailed them.

"The map with the lines!" murmured Jupiter. "What does it mean?"

Pete was also at a lost. "And why is this e-mailed to Sculley? We thought he was behind it. Then it doesn't make sense that he would—"

“But Sculley’s not all clean,” Bob interjected. “He’s up to his neck in it. If I understood the phone call correctly, he’s being blackmailed. At the very least, he needs the gold to trade for something else. And he doesn’t know who the blackmailer is. His ex-wife, our Meg Baker, is probably involved as well.” Bob looked up triumphantly. “I told you before, Miss Baker has her finger in the pie. That explains her e-mail to Sculley.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Jupiter replied stubbornly. “I still bet on Betty. This map here is the key. Sculley was told the general directions in the phone call and responded by saying something like ‘I know this place’. Then he printed this out this map to get the specific location. But where is this place?”

“That’s where the handover will take place,” Bob concluded, “in one hour!”

“More precisely, in fifty-two minutes,” Jupiter noted with a glance at his watch.

“The map...” Pete said. “In fact, we don’t have to guess if we follow Sculley.”

“It’s too late for that now,” Jupe remarked. “Sculley’s long gone, with Dick Perry on his tail.”

“We have no choice,” Bob said. “We have to solve this puzzle to get back in the game.”

“Concentrate on the map,” Jupe urged. “It’s got to be somewhere in the northern part of the greater Los Angeles area—some place to get to within an hour. What could the map represent?”

“Hiking trails in the mountains? A city park?” Pete interjected.

“No, it has to have more than one entrance. Come on, more ideas... or else that stupid Dick Perry will win the race again.” Jupiter’s brain was blocked. He looked at his watch again. “Fellas, hurry up!”

“Why us?” Bob had turned around and was staring out the window. Jupiter’s frantic nature made him completely nervous.

“Why do all the roads on this map end in nothing?” Bob muttered. “Are they all dead ends? They lead to nothing... or to a wall? An obstacle? A border?”

Then Jupiter struck his hand against his forehead. “Geez, Bob! What would we do without your questions? You’re a genius. That’s exactly it! Of course all roads are dead ends. Because they all lead to the sea!”

“To the sea? Sure... these roads are actually paths leading to the cliffs that surround a bay!” Bob exclaimed. “It’s not just any bay, it’s the bay near where the boat sunk! We’ve been there ourselves!”

They bent down in front of the screen. “Look, that fits exactly! If this is the way to the cliffs, here, the first junction, then continue here...” Bob’s finger ran along the lines and finally pointed to the marked point. “Then that should be exactly the small bay from which we swam out to the wreckage. So that’s the meeting point! Wow! We’re about to solve the mystery!”

“Let’s go,” cried Jupiter. “There should still be time.”

But Pete didn’t budge. “We should inform Inspector Cotta,” he said determinedly. “We need backup. I’m not leaving until we do.”

“Then give me the car keys,” Jupiter said.

Pete shook his head and looked at Bob for support. Bob then tried the sensible way. “Jupe, forget about our duel with Dick Perry for a moment,” he said calmly. “It’s about Tom... and Sculley is unpredictable. We should call Cotta.”

“From here? I don’t have the time to explain to Cotta. Why not we go to the cliffs now!”

“Sorry, there’s no phone booth at the cliffs,” Pete said.

“Okay,” Jupiter finally gave in. If Pete and Bob stuck together, he couldn’t do much more. Besides, they were right. “I’ll send him an e-mail with the map attached so he’ll have

the directions as well.”

Then The Three Investigators left Sculley’s house and headed for the coast.

15. The Blackmailer

A glance at Jupiter's watch confirmed that The Three Investigators had just made it before the end of the hour. There were not many cars left on the small car park in the hinterland of the rocky coast. There was no trace of Inspector Cotta's police car.

"What if Cotta reads the e-mail too late?" Bob asked.

"We can't change that now," Jupiter replied. His eyes wandered over to the cars. "Sculley is parked over there," he noted. "And there, at a distance away, is Dick Perry. We've hit the jackpot!" There were no one in both vehicles.

"Let's hurry," Jupiter urged his two friends. "The next few minutes will decide everything!"

They found the way into the hidden little bay even without the map. There weren't many people in the area who knew the path, but those who had been roaming around Rocky Beach from childhood, like the three boys, had always been attracted to these mysteriously hidden coves.

They followed the inconspicuous path, pushed bushes aside with their hands and squeezed past ledges. The closer The Three Investigators got to the sea, the slower they crept along.

Finally, they stopped completely at the signal from Jupiter. "Be careful! Or we may make a critical mistake!"

They heard the waves of the sea a few metres below, hissing on the gravel. The sun was already close to the horizon and a light wind had come up.

"They must be here somewhere... Wait..." Slowly Jupiter pushed past the rock, behind which the path led the last few metres down to the sea.

But he quickly withdrew. "Dick Perry is crouched behind a bush less than ten metres away," hissed Jupiter. "He has chosen an ideal position to watch Sculley. Just keep it down. Why does this guy always get in our way?"

"Because he's smarter than you, Juve," Pete remarked.

"You can't be serious!" Juve snapped back.

Pete laughed softly. "Just kidding."

"Did you get a good look at the bay?" Bob asked Jupiter.

Jupiter shook his head. "Not from here. We have to go back a bit and climb to the headland from there."

Carefully they turned around. A few metres further back, they managed to reach a rocky plateau from which they could observe the bay. However, they were now quite a distance from the scene.

Sculley stood on the beach alone and stared towards the sea. Jupiter followed the direction of his gaze and it pointed at the reef where the *Cutty Shark* had run aground. The mast could still be seen rising out of the water.

"There's nobody around. I wonder who Sculley is supposed to meet here," Bob said. He turned around and looked back at the path they had climbed down.

"The blackmailer might come by boat," Jupiter thought. "I can't imagine that he would take the risk and show up from land. But there is no boat out there... nothing on the open sea

either.”

They looked towards the horizon for anything suspicious. Two ocean-going yachts were sailing far away, but they didn’t seem to come closer.

“Maybe Sculley was also lured into a trap,” Jupiter wondered.

Suddenly, Bob tugged the First Investigator on his sleeve. “Look, something’s happening down there.”

Sculley was knee-deep in the water and had bent over. He seemed to pull something out of the water. It looked like a long piece of wood. “Did anyone bring the binoculars?” Jupiter asked.

Bob took the binoculars out of his jacket pocket and handed it to Juve.

“Let’s see what that is,” said Jupiter. He lay flat on his stomach and supported his arms on a flat stone. That way he could see better.

“That’s not wood,” he said. “It’s a small submarine.”

“A submarine?” Pete remarked.

“Yeah, one of those remote-control things—like a big toy,” Juve said. “Sculley is pulling out a piece of paper and reading it. Now he reaches into his pocket and he has... he has... a gun in his hand. Oh, man, he’s got a gun in his pocket! He puts it on a rock and now he pulls out the gold bar. He puts it in the submarine and looks around. Now he takes the submarine and walks a few steps into the water...”

“I can see that!” Pete exclaimed.

“... And releases the submarine into the sea. It’s leaving... I can still see it... Ingenious! Absolutely brilliant, I must admit! The blackmailer sends a submarine and he himself doesn’t appear at all! Mr Invisible is tricking all of us—Sculley, Dick Perry and us!”

“But where is the blackmailer?” Bob asked. “He must pick up the gold from somewhere!”

“Probably under water,” replied Jupiter while he carefully scanned the water surface with the binoculars for suspicious air bubbles. “Too bad we didn’t bring any scuba gear.” He put the binoculars aside. “I can see anything else. The skylight is reflected too much on the surface of the water.”

“It must be the sunken fishing boat,” Pete suddenly said. “The diver is waiting by it! I saw a long box when I entered the hull yesterday! I’m sure the remote-controlled submarine is in it. I could... maybe... swim there. Not too close, of course. Just to see who it is.”

Jupiter and Bob looked at the Second Investigator in awe.

“What’s the matter with you?” Bob asked. “Are you not afraid?”

“I have to make up for the glass globe that I broke,” Pete said softly. “And I want to know what’s going on. We don’t want to lose the lead, else Tom will be gone.”

Jupiter and Bob exchanged a look... but Pete kept talking. “Look, I’m going to climb a bit on the other side of that rock so Sculley can’t see me. Then I swim away. I can hold my breath for quite a long time. I don’t have to surface more than four or five times until I reach the reef. If I’m lucky, nobody will spot me.”

“But by then, the blackmailer will be long gone,” Bob interjected.

“I don’t think so. Look, Sculley’s still there. He hasn’t got his goods yet.”

“Cash in advance,” Jupiter confirmed. “The gold bar is gone. I wonder if he’ll get what’s coming to him.”

“Just to be on the safe side, you take this.” Pete tossed Bob his wallet and car keys. He took off his jacket and T-shirt. Then he started to climb down the rock. Luckily the wave was not strong so he could slide into the water without any problems.

“Hopefully it’ll be fine,” Jupiter mumbled as Pete waved to them once more.

The Second Investigator swam a few lengths. Then he took a deep breath and dived under.

Sculley was still staring at the water. If something didn't happen right away, he'd see Pete surfacing for air somewhere. He might even think that Pete was the blackmailer. Jupiter didn't dare to imagine what would happen then, more so when Sculley had a gun.

Dick Perry was covered by a rock. At least he couldn't see Pete for a while.

Nervously, the First Investigator pinched his lower lip. Then he took the binoculars again to watch Sculley, who was walking restlessly back and forth on the beach.

"Bob, do you see Pete?" Jupiter asked, never taking his eyes off Sculley.

"He just showed up for the first time!" Bob exclaimed.

But at that moment, Sculley's attention was distracted. The submarine was back. Impatiently, the man stomped into the water up to his waist and pulled it ashore. Only now did he take a glance to skim the surface of the water. Luckily, Pete had gone back below the water surface.

Jupiter held his breath when Sculley opened the submarine's hatch. He took out a small bundle wrapped in cloth and unfolded it. The contents glittered in the evening sun—gold, silver, gems. It was jewellery.

"Now something is becoming clear to me," Jupiter said. "This case is more than a blackmail—it's an extortion. If we catch Sculley, we'll be doing Inspector Cotta a big favour."

"What about Pete?" Bob asked.

Suddenly, they heard a noise over the gentle rolling of the waves. They turned around and saw that a diver had come to the water surface. He was swimming towards the shore in fast strokes. It had to be the extortionist! He was trying to reach the neighbouring bay to escape from there.

With the binoculars, Jupiter focussed on the diver who was wearing a diving mask. The First Investigator put the binoculars down and discovered the reason for the escape—a little way behind the diver, Pete was pursuing and was closing in metre by metre.

Sculley had also noticed them. He raised his gun and took aim. But then he seemed to change his mind. Quickly he put the gun back in his pocket and climbed onto the rock that led to the neighbouring bay.

Jupiter then saw that Dick Perry had also left his hiding place and followed Sculley. Perry didn't have to be particularly careful. Sculley apparently had only one goal left and that was to catch the diver.

Jupiter put the binoculars in his jacket pocket. "Now it's time to move fast, Bob."

16. Perry Strikes

“What if Sculley thinks Pete is in cahoots with the diver?” cried Bob as they slid down the rocks to begin the chase.

“We’ve got to warn Pete or take Sculley out,” the First Investigator replied.

When Jupiter and Bob jumped onto the gravel of the small bay a short time later, there was no sign of Sculley or Dick Perry.

Nervously Jupiter looked back up the slope. “Cotta, where is Inspector Cotta?”

Although they were already quite out of breath, they immediately started to climb up the next rock. A few exhausting moments later, they had reached the ridge from where they could see into the next bay. Jupiter and Bob held their breath.

Pete had almost caught up with the diver. It was a woman, who took off her fins there in the shallow water and then scurried the last metres to the shore. In panic, she turned to her pursuer. The diving mask covered her face. Pete was already swimming up fast towards her. Now he too had ground under his feet. The woman ran off and set course for the path leading up to the plateau.

Pete had just reached the beach when a harsh cry broke out: “Stop! Both of you! Or I’ll shoot!”

Behind a rock, not ten metres from the woman, Sculley stood up and threatened with his gun. The woman and Pete stopped immediately.

“Nice couple I caught.” Sculley laughed bitterly. His gun went back and forth between them.

“Hey, I’ve seen you before,” Sculley cried angrily. “Aren’t you one of the two guys who asked about the housekeeper job? So that’s how it is. You work together! Give me the gold!”

“But where would I—” Pete shrugged helplessly.

Sculley noticed that Pete was carrying nothing else with him and he turned to the woman who had not moved until now.

“Well, I guess you got the gold bar, pretty. You can take off your mask now. I know it’s you, Meg! Hand over the gold or I’ll shoot both of you!”

Jupiter flinched. Sculley was irritable to the bone. As quick-tempered as he is, there was no way to rule out that he was serious.

Pete started to stutter. Jupiter had to do something to distract Sculley. He was about to give a yell when Bob pulled him by the sleeve and pointed down. Unnoticed by Sculley, Dick Perry had sneaked in. Now he was about to jump.

Sculley was aiming at Pete. “Come on now! One, two...”

Then he received a blow on the hand. The gun dropped to the ground. Perry grabbed Sculley and lifted him off balance. The Santa Monica detective was a master of his trade. Although Sculley was physically far superior, Perry had handcuffed him within seconds. Sculley lay on the ground cursing.

Jupiter saw the situation with mixed feelings. “Now we have to be grateful to that stupid detective,” the First Investigator grumbled and started moving.

Bob did not care. The main thing was that Pete was safe. But for a moment, nobody had paid attention to the diver. She wanted to take the opportunity to slip away without attracting

attention. Jupiter was the first to notice and yelled out: "The diver! She's getting away!"

Dick Perry grabbed Sculley's gun and pointed it at the woman. "Stop or I'll shoot!" he warned.

Unimpressed, the woman climbed further up the slope. Apparently she didn't care at all.

"Damn!" Dick Perry cried and began to climb after her.

Jupiter assessed their escape route in a flash. "We can cut across the ridge," he told Bob. "Then we can catch the diver before Perry does!"

The woman realized that she was walking into a trap. Her movements became slower and slower, probably she was also losing strength. Halfway up, she finally gave up.

But this time, Jupiter wanted to be the first. He worked his way forward. The stones rolled away under his feet and his trousers were already torn at his knees. Bob could hardly follow. Dick Perry approached from below, no less driven by ambition.

It was close, very close. But the fat detective from Santa Monica was ahead. Exactly one step ahead of Jupiter, he stepped up to the diver and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Dick Perry, Santa Monica Detective Agency. I'm taking you to the police... Miss Betty Sutton!"

"Betty Sutton?" Bob remarked, who by then had joined the small group.

Jupiter nodded silently.

Perry's eyes, however, were sparkling. "Yes, this is Betty Sutton, you super detectives! I beat you again! I caught Sculley and Betty." With one swift move, he pulled the diving mask off.

"Detectives suck," Betty said, spitting on the ground.

Dick Perry triumphed. He opened the side pocket of her diving jacket and fished out the small gold bar which flashed in the last rays of the setting sun. Perry smiled and let the bar disappear into his pocket.

"So that's what all the fuss is about! That lump must be worth a lot!" He nodded to Betty Sutton. "So go on now, get back down!"

Sculley was still lying on the ground, guarded by Pete who was shivering with cold by now.

"Betty Sutton," Sculley snarled at the woman. "You witch! I wouldn't have thought of that! I should have shot you!"

Dick Perry made a reassuring gesture. "Take it easy, Jack. You're in deep enough trouble on your own! But one question remains..." He turned to Betty. "Where have you been hiding Tom? Probably in your house?"

"I won't say anything," the woman declared stubbornly.

The more Perry spoke, the more he got on Jupiter's nerves. The First Investigator had long since reached the same stage of understanding as Dick Perry. Unfortunately, the competitor from Santa Monica had been one step faster at the decisive moment. But Jupiter wanted to show that he too was on the same level of the investigation so he grabbed the opportunity when Perry took a breather.

"You were playing a terrible game, Betty," he began, staring at Betty Sutton. "As a housekeeper, you sneaked into Mr Sculley's house. He owns five fishing boats that he rents out. He can't make much money on them. But he lives in a luxury house. It doesn't add up, you thought, and you soon found out his secret. For a lot of money, Sculley does dark messenger services. He transports stolen jewellery by sea to other middlemen, who probably take the hot items out of the country. There have been many spectacular jewellery thefts in the Los Angeles area recently."

“The police will now take out the whole gang,” Perry smugly interjected. “That shouldn’t be too difficult now that you, Mr Sculley, have finally been caught.”

“But one day an errand went wrong,” Jupiter turned to Sculley. “In a storm and bad weather, the *Cutty Shark* struck the reef and went under... and you, Mr Sculley, barely escaped.”

“But the jewellery was sunk too,” Perry added. “When you went to get it the next day, someone else had already beat you to it.”

Jupiter pointed at Betty. “Namely Miss Sutton. She had taken the jewels. But she couldn’t do anything with stolen goods. So she extorted from you, Mr Sculley—jewellery for gold. That gave her even more leverage than the photo she took of you entering your boat with a case full of jewellery.”

“Gangs of thieves whose beautiful catch sinks into the sea can get very unpleasant,” Perry continued with a critical side glance at Jupiter.

“But Betty also had a problem,” continued Jupiter, unimpressed. “It was Meg Baker, Sculley’s ex-wife. She also poked around in Sculley’s dark business, but Betty did not want her to get in the way.”

“Exactly,” Perry quickly interjected before Jupiter’s explanations went too far. “Betty, you became friends with Miss Baker, if only in appearance. You arranged the jellyfish to put pressure on Miss Baker—to keep her away from the sunken boat which was your base for the handover.”

Betty turned away. “This detective talk is getting on my nerves! Two of the smart-aleck variety are absolutely unbearable!”

“I don’t think so,” Sculley rumbled in and gave the woman a nasty look. “Certain parts of what had been said were very enlightening. But what about the boys? Why are they involved?”

“We are also detectives,” Pete explained trembling.

“Actually we’re looking for Tom Wood,” Jupiter continued. “Also a victim of Betty Sutton. Something else went wrong. Tom managed to hack into Miss Sutton’s computer where he found the image files that were going to prove that Miss Sutton was a blackmailer. But somehow she tracked down Tom, went to his house, took the files and kidnapped him.” He looked Betty Sutton right in the eye. “Where is Tom, Miss Sutton?”

“I won’t say a word without my lawyer!”

“You don’t have to—” began Dick Perry.

“—Because we can explain everything,” Jupiter interrupted. He smiled superiorly. “We’ll just go to your house, and I’m sure we’ll find something there.”

Betty snorted.

“Do it, boys,” said Dick Perry with a side glance at Betty. “I guess you’ll find Tom there. But don’t forget that I, Dick Perry, have solved the case. Even though you, fatso, didn’t deduce too badly. Maybe someday, when you are older, you’ll even be a real detective! And don’t forget this: ‘To solve your cases surely and quickly, the best in the business is Dick Perry!’”

He laughed and looked around, but no one made a face. Perry shrugged his shoulders and continued: “Okay, I’ll be fair to you three. You take care of Tom and this bully here.” He pointed at Sculley. “But for Miss Sutton, the heart of it all, I’ll deliver her to the police myself.”

“Inspector Cotta should be arriving here shortly,” Jupiter remarked.

“Cotta? Rocky Beach?” Dick Perry made a disgusted face. It looked like he had bitten a sour lemon. “No, no, forget it! Santa Monica is where the music is. I work with Inspector

Taylor there. I'm afraid your little nest won't be able to claim this success."

He grabbed the gun and pushed Betty Sutton forward. "Let's go. To the car. Step on it, lady!"

17. Solution to the Mystery

Dejectedly, The Three Investigators looked on as Perry and Miss Sutton left. Dick Perry's mockery of them was hard to digest.

"He didn't need to belittle Rocky Beach," Jupiter complained. More so, he was furious that the detective from Santa Monica had won the race.

However, Tom had not yet been found, and they had to take care of that now. Bob had thought about Tom as well, but had come across another question: "Wait a minute. We don't know where Betty Sutton's house is."

Pete moaned. "Bob, couldn't you at least go get my clothes? I'm freezing!" The sea breeze had become stronger and Pete had goose bumps.

Bob looked at him compassionately and took off his jacket. "Here, put this on first. I suggest you all climb back up to the car park, get in the car and wait for Cotta. In the meantime, I can go get your clothes. If the inspector has not arrived by the time I get back, we'll take Mr Sculley to the police station ourselves. There, the police will be able to help locate Betty Sutton's house."

Pete and Jupiter agreed. "Go, Mr Sculley!"

It took a while for Juve and Pete to lead Sculley to the car park. Dick Perry's car had long gone. Pete's MG and Sculley's car were the only ones parked there. Dusk had fallen and the wind was getting stronger and stronger. They stowed Sculley in the back seat of the MG and Pete sat relieved on the driver's seat.

Just as Bob returned with Pete's clothes, they saw a few car lights boring through the twilight.

"Maybe that's the inspector," Pete hoped. He didn't trust Sculley and wanted to get rid of him as quickly as possible.

A car appeared. Slowly it bumped along the sand road. Pete breathed again. It was actually a police car. The wheels crunched on the sand as the car turned, and then stopped. Cotta and another policeman got out. They could tell that Cotta was in a bad mood.

"I hope you have a good reason for calling me! We have just caught one of the members of the jewellery gang! I have to interrogate him urgently!" Then he spotted Sculley in the back seat of the MG and fell silent.

Jupiter approached the inspector. At least now he could score a success. "That fits perfectly, Inspector! We present to you the person who is responsible for transferring out the stolen jewellery—Mr Jack Sculley of Santa Monica! He took the items out to sea on one of his boats to hand them to middlemen whom I believe took them out of the country."

"Really?" Curious, the inspector took a step closer and peered in through the window. "Get out of the car!"

Sculley laboriously struggled to get out of the back seat of the car, and then turned to Cotta. "What's this all about?" he asked in a bad mood. "Am I under arrest or what's this all about? Perhaps you could explain to me my rights, Commissioner. And then I'll tell you the truth about these three wretched detective snoopers there. They tried to sneak into my house—disguised as housekeepers!"

“Inspector Cotta,” Cotta said coolly. “Not Commissioner. I’ll explain your rights on the way back.” He then directed the other policeman to take Sculley into the police car.

Then Cotta turned to Jupiter again. “How did you find him?”

Jupiter summed up what had happened.

“So Betty Sutton kidnapped Tom?” Cotta asked in surprise. “And I thought the boy had just run away from home!”

Jupiter shook his head. “The e-mail from Tom to his mother was a fake. Betty Sutton tried to keep the police off her back with it, which she succeeded in doing.”

“And where is that Miss Sutton now?” Cotta wanted to know.

“Dick Perry is taking her to the Santa Monica Police Department right now,” Jupiter said somewhat sheepishly. “We still have to rescue Tom.”

“So Dick Perry outdid you, is it?” Cotta wondered. “Well, it’s amazing that Dick Perry could do that after a string of failures...”

“Somehow he couldn’t even wait for you to come,” Jupe added. “He said he prefers to work with Inspector Taylor at Santa Monica.”

“Inspector Taylor?” Cotta remarked. “Is he kidding or what?”

“What?” Jupe wondered.

“Inspector Taylor is no longer at Santa Monica,” Cotta said. “He has been posted to Pasadena.”

“Are you sure?” Jupe asked.

“Of course I am sure,” Cotta said. “I work closely with the Santa Monica police and I practically know every policeman there.”

“When was Inspector Taylor posted out?” Jupe continued to probe.

“Uh... more than four months ago or so,” Cotta said.

“Perhaps we can discuss the details at the police station,” Bob said, “and we need you to locate Betty Sutton’s house. I think that’s the most urgent thing right now.”

Jupiter cleared his throat. “No, Bob, we’re changing plans,” he decided.

Bob frowned. What was wrong with the First Investigator? He suddenly seemed different.

Jupe then turned to Cotta and said: “Inspector, we don’t need to go to Betty Sutton’s house. Our destination is Marina del Rey. We need you to come with us, Inspector! Every second counts!”

Inspector Cotta looked at Jupiter in surprise. He was used to a lot from that boy, but what was this about?

Jupiter forced himself to rest. “Just trust me, Inspector. I’ll explain everything later.” He pushed Bob into the back seat of the MG and slid into the passenger seat. “Step on it, Pete. We’ll go ahead... to Marina del Rey!”

“Am I your taxi?” the Second Investigator complained. Befuddled, Pete started the car. Slowly he bumped along the sand track.

“Faster, faster,” Jupiter told him.

“Listen, you’ve already wrecked my car roof! You want me to wreck the rest of my car as well?” Pete responded annoyingly.

“Come on,” Jupiter said. “It’s about Tom!”

Reluctantly, Pete stepped on the accelerator. “Jupe, if you continue to be silent on this matter, you can’t count on me.”

“I’m still thinking. Get on the coast road first, then we’ll see.”

Pete had to slow down, because they came through a small settlement. Then he accelerated again. He looked in the rear view mirror. Behind, Inspector Cotta appeared.

A short time later, when they were speeding across the road at exactly the permitted top speed. Bob thought it was appropriate that Jupiter finally reveal his suspicions: “Now tell us what this is all about!”

“I’m still trying to consolidate everything... You’ll know soon,” Jupe said while deep in thought.

Just as they entered Marina del Rey, Jupiter instructed: “Stop! Turn here!”

Just in time, Pete was able to brake. He almost missed the road to the harbour. He finally reached the intersection to the piers.

Jupiter pointed forward. “Park your car. From here, we’ll have to continue the search on foot.”

Meanwhile Cotta’s car had come up behind them. He flashed his headlights at Pete, overtook him and parked. He got out, spoke to the other policeman and pointed to Sculley who was sitting in the back seat. The policeman nodded.

Then Cotta came up to The Three Investigators with bold steps. “And now what?”

“Now we’ll look for Dick Perry,” replied Jupiter.

18. Wrong Game

“And where can we find Mr Perry?” Cotta asked.

“We must look out for Perry’s boat. It’s called ‘Barbara’.” Jupe said.

“Named after his assistant,” Cotta remembered.

“Come along, fellas!” cried Jupiter. They ran off towards the pier.

While running, Jupiter tried to get an overview of where which boats were located. There were more than enough boats here and most were bigger and more expensive than what he was looking for. Finally, he found the boat between several smaller motorboats. Dick Perry was about to untie the lines.

“Hurry up!” Jupiter cried and pushed his way through a group of tourists standing on the jetty.

In his slippers, Pete could hardly follow him. Bob and Inspector Cotta were only slightly faster. Dick Perry heard Jupiter coming and straightened up. He was still holding the stern line in his hand. Panting, Jupiter stopped in front of him.

“What’s up, fatso?” Perry carefully probed and stared at Jupe with squinting eyes. “Have you come here to congratulate me?”

Panting heavily, Bob, Pete and the inspector arrived. Perry took a step back.

“The case is not yet solved,” Jupiter said. “Where is Betty Sutton?”

“At the police department, of course!”

Jupiter shook his head and was about to start an explanation when the cabin door opened. Betty’s head appeared. “Dick, why don’t you come on—”

Then she saw The Three Investigators and fell silent.

“Hello Barbara,” Jupiter said dryly.

Astonished Pete and Bob looked at their friend. Barbara?

“Barbara Stevens alias Betty Sutton,” Jupiter said confidently. “Dick Perry’s assistant. She’s not only his business partner, but also his partner in crime. Inspector, you can arrest the couple—for kidnapping and extortion.”

Cotta had a puzzled look on his face. Dick Perry looked like he was hit by a punch. The superior smile was gone from his face.

“I’ll tell the inspector the whole story,” Jupe said faintly. Now it was up to him to fully enjoy his triumph.

“Dick Perry and Barbara Stevens! I suppose you used to be honest working detectives. Yeah, that must be how it started. You watched suspects, solved cases, figured out how other people did dark things. But one day, something changed. You capitalized on the mistakes of others and no longer handing them over to the police.

“I don’t know if Sculley is the first case like this, but you found out that he was up to something. You photographed him boarding his boat with stolen jewellery to take the valuables out of the country. Under the false name ‘Betty Sutton’, Barbara sneaked into his house and spied on him. At that point in time, you had the intention to use the photo for blackmail. We’ve already figured that out. Then the boat went down and you got hold of the jewellery. That was even better because now you get to extort from him—the jewellery in exchange for gold!”

Dick Perry looked around and said nothing. Pete and Bob nodded with relief.

Jupe continued: "Betty discovered Meg Baker's e-mail to Sculley and the plan was compromised. Miss Baker had to be kept away from the sunken boat, because that was your base for the exchange—you had the remote-controlled submarine stored there. Therefore, you started the jellyfish attack followed by sending the jellyfish virus to her computer."

"Which remains to be proven," Dick Perry threw in weakly.

"To make sure things didn't get out of hand, Dick Perry got Meg Baker to hire him as a detective. He simply dropped a leaflet in her mailbox, and she took the bait. What a double-cross! That way, you would have had everything under control... if we hadn't shown up..."

"A very nasty turn of events indeed," Perry murmured.

"You managed to get us out of Miss Baker's house, but before that, you heard me saying that we would be working with Tom Wood to trace the sender of the computer virus. That was when you decided to take him out of the picture as well so that he could not trace the e-mail to you. Anyway, you were successful as Tom did not have enough time to confirm the location of the sender.

"Cleverly, you also took over investigations for Tom Wood's mum right away and thus had all the strings in your hand." Jupiter took a short break.

"Almost everything fell into place. Not only you took Tom, but his hard disk as well," Jupe continued. "With that, you knew that Tom sent us the two image files and then you sent us a fake e-mail with the virus to wipe out our hard disk. That's pretty devious of you."

"I knew about the e-mail Tom sent to you," Perry revealed. "And also, I wanted to interfere with your work... and scare you a little..."

Jupiter nodded. "We were a thorn in your side. But we had noticed something strange—rather than focussing on investigating for Miss Baker and Mrs Wood, you were keeping an eye on us most of the time. Now it all makes sense. There was no need for you to investigate anything, only to keep us in check so that we would not interfere with your devious scheme. All in all, you had us under control at all times."

"It wasn't always easy," Perry murmured. His eyes had lost all cunningness.

Jupiter almost felt a little pity for Dick Perry, but he continued: "Well, I never dreamed we'd win our detective race this way. But hats off, Mr Perry... for the way you made us think that exposing Betty Sutton was a real coup. We totally bought it. It was the most elegant and audacious way of getting away. I guess you two would have run off with the gold and never come back."

"That's right, because he has already closed his office," Inspector Cotta suddenly said. "I checked with Santa Monica police on the way here."

Meanwhile Barbara had got out of the boat and stood next to Dick Perry. "We were going to continue our tour for many years to come," she defiantly said. "But because you interfered, we had to leave."

"Mr Perry, you saved my life," Pete said, "down at the wreckage. Why is that?"

Perry smiled. "I could say now, so that more attention is not drawn to the boat. But it's not just that. Dead people are not our business. Barbara and I, we work with tricks, but we never put human lives at risk."

"So where's Tom?" Pete asked.

"He's in there," Perry nodded towards the boat. "We would've released him somewhere."

"Why didn't you say so?" Jupiter left the group and jumped aboard. With one move, he tore open the cabin door and stumbled down the steps. "Tom! Are you here? Tom!"

Jupiter heard knocking. He looked around. It came out of a storage compartment on the side. He went closer, pulled the latch to the side and folded up the wooden door.

The familiar face of Tom Wood appeared. It looked a little wrinkled, but it was radiant. “Hi, Jupe! It’s about time! Does it always take you so long to solve a mystery?”

Jupiter hesitated for a moment. Then he replied with a grin: “Come on, let’s get out of here!”